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## Critical analytical paradigms of post-racial television in contemporary U.S. comedies

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**Critical Analytical**  
**Paradigms of Post-Racial Television in Contemporary U.S. Comedies**

by

Nadia Mohd Rasidi, BA, MA

**PhD Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of English

King's College London

King's College London

November 2017

*To my family and friends: Thank you for seeing me and loving me fiercely, still.*

## Critical Analytical

### Paradigms of Post-Racial Television in Contemporary U.S. Comedies

My research focuses on the mediation of new Asian American subjectivities and racialised identities within the context of contemporary American television. While many have debunked the myth of the post-racial, this thesis, by reconfiguring 'post' as a 'working through' rather than a 'beyond' will use it as a productive starting point to consider a variety of frameworks for addressing and approaching race and representation. It seeks to answer questions triggered by President Obama's election – such as how racial inequality has been newly configured and obfuscated in an era shaped by an eagerness to herald the end of racism, and how people of colour in positions of cultural influence are responding to this transformed narrative in ways that challenge and complicate structures of oppression – questions that become more urgent in the emerging political conjuncture.

I will look at discrete models of interrogating post-raciality and how it is created and/or (de)constructed through various representational approaches, positioning the post as a 'working-through' and avoiding notions of fixity in delineating or not-delineating race. The 'post-racial' in its current popular cultural iteration is strategically deployed as purposefully and problematically vague, but in thinking of the pre-mark of the post-racial as a orientational manoeuvring of bounded categories, it (re)gains traction as a discourse of navigation. This thesis is shaped by the debates and theories posed by critical race theory which inform the textual analysis of contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> Century television shows created by and starring self-identified Asian Americans, which will be contextualised from a historical and socio-cultural perspective. I identify four main ways that race is being 'worked through' on television.

The first chapter considers the program *The Mindy Project* and how it

plays with visibility and embodiment as neo-liberal devices to affirm/assert given racial identities. The second chapter looks at the shows *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* and how they disentangle the relationship between the act of racialization and responses to it, examining narrative approaches to the identification and categorization of race. The third chapter assesses *Master of None* and *Dr. Ken* in parallel to discern the possible ways in which the raced subject grapples with limiting cultural legacies to re-map how authenticity is produced in present-day media. The final chapter evaluates *Atlanta* and *Insecure* as shows that have emerged in direct response to the foreclosing boundaries of the post-racial, offering purposefully specific portrayals of the raced experience, and deliberates how engagement with explicit racial discourse might provide comprehensive counterpoints to historical elisions of minorities and the resistant practices created in response to the reinvigorated and freshly legitimised racism emerging in Trump's America. In the face of an emptying out of the 'post-racial' through its deployment as an umbrella term for meaningless 'colourblind' practices, I will make 'post-racial' meaningful by looking at actual representational mediating strategies.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

On March 23, 2012, one week after the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Florida and nearly four years into his historic first term as America's first black head of state, President Barack Obama stood in the White House Rose Garden and uttered the words, "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon."<sup>1</sup> Plucked from a longer statement appealing to the empathy of "every parent in America" concerning the need to allow investigations to continue unimpeded, it was these nine words that made headlines in subsequent days, and in doing so, gave lie to the fiction of the post-racial that had until then been inexorably linked to Obama's ascendancy.

Throughout his 2008 presidential campaign and continuing through the first few of his eight years in the Oval Office, Obama's political life largely operated through what Michael Tesler calls an "inclination toward racial silence"<sup>2</sup> – a purposeful avoidance of engaging with racial controversies to preserve an image of transcending race that often manifested in cynicism becoming a rhetorical substitute for racism. In this mode, Obama maintained that voters were not racist, despite the growing right-wing clamour about his birth certificate, they simply needed to be convinced of his capability. On November 5, 2008, following the cue of their candidates, optimistic liberals swept up in the ecstasy of the win ushered in of an era free of racial underpinnings, or so it was hoped. The term "post-racial" swept through media and politics as the idea of the post-race presidency captured the public imagination. News headlines welcomed "the post-racial election"<sup>3</sup>, probing "the end of black politics"<sup>4</sup>, and "the end of white America"<sup>5</sup>. The palpable excitement over "the end of race as we know it"<sup>6</sup> surrounding Obama's election is useful because it reinforces the contradictory nature of racial identity: it was progressive in

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, Krissah, and Scott Wilson. "Obama on Trayvon Martin: 'If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon'." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 23 Mar. 2012, [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-if-i-had-a-son-hed-look-like-trayvon/2012/03/23/gIQAkpPpVS\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.2701d620683d](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-if-i-had-a-son-hed-look-like-trayvon/2012/03/23/gIQAkpPpVS_story.html?utm_term=.2701d620683d).

<sup>2</sup> Tesler, Michael, and David O. Sears. *Obama's race: The 2008 election and the dream of a post-racial America*. University of Chicago Press, 2010: p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> "Jim Hoagland - The Post-Racial Election." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 2 Nov. 2008, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/31/AR2008103103360.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/31/AR2008103103360.html).

<sup>4</sup> Bai, Matt. "Is Obama the End of Black Politics?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Aug. 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/magazine/10politics-t.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/magazine/10politics-t.html).

<sup>5</sup> Hsu, Hua. "The End of White America?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 27 Oct. 2017, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/01/the-end-of-white-america/307208/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/01/the-end-of-white-america/307208/).

<sup>6</sup> Early, G. L. (2008) 'The end of race as we know it', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 October, pp. B11–B13.



terms of acknowledging the possibility of a black president and regressive in its unspoken need to sublimate his racialization because of an ongoing exaltation of unseeing race.

The fascination with a “race-free” world has played out on celluloid screen in various forms over recent decades.<sup>7</sup> Vague notions of diversity and multiculturalism have long been championed, yet never clearly defined in their execution, and upon closer inspection, have tended towards a prioritization of quantity over quality. For much of the late 1990s and early-to-mid-2000s, the tokenization of people of colour took place under a more palatable name: colourblindness - a concept that allowed for reductive assessments of a person’s or people’s history and presumed the substitutability of minority experiences. Much scholarly work has been produced on the colourblind discourse and its impact on television representation. However, in the years after Obama’s election, Hollywood has slowly attempted to disentangle itself from colourblindness and turn to embrace the post-racial, an even more nebulously articulated term that has been able to provide cover for a multitude of transgressions. Research on the intersection of minority narratives in the media and the post-racial moment is burgeoning but currently lacks specific engagement with new trends in creative work produced by minorities themselves, particularly Asian Americans. This thesis teases out media narratives that begin at racial crossroads which allow for the fact of racial difference to shape the context and interpretations of those minority experiences. This introductory chapter will first provide background to the working definition of post-racial as it is used in this thesis through a brief history of racial stratification in the United States and the discourses that surround this history; and second, use this overview as a starting point to form an argument about how it is crucial that post-racial television and its representative approaches are studied through a lens that decenters whiteness. I aim to explore the machinations of post-raciality as an institutional practice that is dependent upon social discourse to reinforce its ideological power.

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<sup>7</sup> See Medved, M. (2003) ‘Hollywood finally moves beyond racial obsession’, *USA Today*, 10 June, p. 13A; Beltrán, M. C. (2005) ‘The new Hollywood racelessness: only the fast, furious, (and multiracial) will survive’, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 50–67; La Ferla, R. (2003) ‘Generation E.A.: ethnically ambiguous’, *New York Times*, 28 December. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/28/fashion/28ETHN.html?pagewanted=2> (accessed 28 May 2017).

## History of stratification in America

Before an examination of contemporary racial representations can take place, it is necessary to contextualize the history of hostilities faced by people of colour to understand the ways in which post-racial culture is a myth. Playing along with that myth is part and parcel of existing in a society that still filters “good” members through the lens of white embodiment. Identity in American society can be understood as not “racial” but “racialised” within the political framework of liberalism, which promises universal equality, and dismisses racial discrimination and violence as accidental or incidental instead of structural. The rhetoric of equal protection propagated through post-racial media conceals the systematic impulse to exclude certain populations. Vulnerable groups are subject to changing representation based on the perceived threat they might pose through their determined presence or absence. Incidents of dehumanization whether tacit or overt, when replicated in the media, must be confronted as systemic and purposeful and not just accidental violations. The idea of a post-racial America reflected in the media acts as a narrative of distraction. As Charles Mills has argued, pervasive racial inequality — understood within the frames of legal, social, political systems — persists because “whites themselves are unable to understand the world that they themselves have made.”<sup>8</sup>

The making of early American history began with the belief that racial stratification as a determinate scientific process could be used to justify the bloody brutality of African slavery and native genocide. Nineteenth century American scholars invoked French theologian Isaac La Peyrère’s theory of polygenism as scientific recourse for justifying slavery, centering the debate on whether the origin of races was either singular (monogenism) or separate (polygenism).<sup>9</sup> The popularity of polygenism grew in large part because it held a strictly creationist and deterministic view of human origins that supported the natural oppression of “inferior” peoples. Building on this theory of innate distinction, Josiah Nott advanced a belief in the fundamental craniological

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<sup>8</sup> Mills, Charles Wade. *The racial contract*. Cornell University Press, 1997: p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Livingstone, David N. *Adam’s ancestors: race, religion, and the politics of human origins*. JHU Press, 2008.

differences between human beings, and the inferiority of “the African” became an acceptable explanation for the oppressive and dehumanizing undertaking of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

In 1677, Dr. William Petty declared that “savage people” were the direct link between Caucasians and apes.<sup>11</sup> Petty identified these “savage people” as Africans who as lesser beings were claimed to have been put on the earth to serve the superior Europeans. Carl von Linne’s work further expanded on this assumption of a God-sanctioned natural hierarchy by determining a classification system based on the four types of races, arguing that Americans were regulated by custom, Europeans by laws, Asians by opinion, and Africans by caprice.<sup>12</sup>

In reflecting on this history of stratification, Stephen Spencer writes that “the use of racial divisions emerged as a way of resolving the conflict between, on the one hand, the ideology of equality for all and universal reason and, on the other, facts of social inequality.”<sup>13</sup> Biological determinism offered a simple and uncritical explanation for the contradictions apparent in eighteenth century American society during which emerging Enlightenment ideals of justice and equality seemingly co-existed without conflict alongside the fresh horrors of the chattel trade. Race was ascribed solely to non-whites while whites benefited from “white invisibility”, an unmarked racelessness<sup>14</sup> that positioned whiteness as inherently meritorious and deserving of special privileges, rendering the enslavement of those lacking this “quality” beyond rational reproach. The social construction of whiteness as the default thus stoked the racial antagonism required to reinforce nineteenth century American class systems which persist to this day.

Although it appears that American attitudes towards race have undergone major transformations in the five decades since the civil rights movement began, a closer look reveals that the systemic injustices enforced in the era of Jim Crow have simply been

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<sup>10</sup> Popkin, Richard H. "Eighteenth-Century Racism." *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (1999): 508.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph, Joe W. "White columns and Black hands: Class and classification in the plantation ideology of the Georgia and South Carolina low country." *Historical Archaeology* (1993): 57-73.

<sup>12</sup> Hudson, Nicholas. "From “nation” to race”: The origin of racial classification in eighteenth-century thought." *Eighteenth-century studies* 29.3 (1996): 247-264.

<sup>13</sup> Spencer, Stephen. *Race and ethnicity: culture, identity and representation*. Routledge, 2014: p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Caliendo and Charlton McIlwain write that the idea of racelessness allows whites to “tacitly assume that they are race neutral and that only those who are members of racial (power) minority groups have a race.” McIlwain, Charlton, and Stephen M. Caliendo. *Race appeal: How candidates invoke race in US political campaigns*. Temple University Press, 2011: p. 6.

transmuted into more covert divisions that forego the explicit language of biological rationalization and legal segregation. In their place, cultural biases have arisen which are more subtle and coded but are equally damaging.<sup>15</sup>

### **Antiblackness in America**

The history of America is a history of antiblackness. By presenting a short history of antiblackness as it is rooted in American history, I am not trying to give an in-depth history of race relations but rather a summary of the key ideas that transform the post-racial from an abstract idea to a concrete social and cultural structure. An examination of the history of ethnic groups that migrated to America bearing non-white status shows that the acquisition of whiteness took place over the course of several generations, succeeding in no small part through displays of antiblackness. For example, in 1974, attempts by the Massachusetts State Board of Education to mandate integration-minded school busing in several largely white Irish Boston neighbourhoods resulted in riots, several deaths, and a mass white exodus from the system.<sup>16</sup> Colourblind ideology in a post-racial context implicates a social structure comprising a uniform and undiscerning oppression based on individual experiences. However, the reality is that different racial and ethnic groups face different material consequences of stratification. Although the non-recognition of difference is intrinsically linked to the absence of racism, this practice of unseeing only props up existing structural imbalances by requiring that they go unchallenged. The extent to which people of colour reap the benefits of honorary whiteness depends upon how a specific group is positively or negatively perceived in its relationship to whiteness or blackness. This perpetual tension is useful to white America's defence of the status quo as non-black people of colour are enticed to distance themselves from the black American experience of race. This ideology undermines the potential for antiracist cooperation between black and non-black people of colour.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Ferber, Abby L. "The construction of black masculinity white supremacy now and then." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 31.1 (2007): 11-24; Leitner, Helga. "Spaces of encounters: Immigration, race, class, and the politics of belonging in small-town America." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102.4 (2012): 828-846; Bobo, Lawrence D. "Somewhere between Jim Crow & post-racialism: Reflections on the racial divide in America today." *Daedalus* 140.2 (2011): 11-36.

<sup>16</sup> Formisano, Ronald P. *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> See McClain, Paula D., et al. "Racial distancing in a southern city: Latino immigrants' views of black Americans." *Journal of Politics* 68.3 (2006): 571-584; Gay, Claudine. "Seeing difference: The effect of economic disparity on black attitudes toward Latinos." *American Journal of Political Science* 50.4 (2006):

Antiblackness perpetuates tensions between communities of colour by encouraging the complicity of non-black people of colour in black oppression. For example, the history of abysmal oppression against Native Americans has not prevented them from regularly using antiblackness in their protest of Washington's NFL team's dehumanizing mascot.<sup>18</sup> Blackness is the benchmark by which the acceptable treatment of minorities is tested. As blackness is considered the bottom tier of existence, the sentiment "even black people are not treated this way" becomes the underlying rhetoric spouted as protection by other oppressed groups. A concerted effort to normalize antiblackness allows groups to feel comfortable co-opting black scholarship, ideologies, and praxes, treating black people as though they solely exist as a "reference point" for oppression and viewing black labour as a product to consume. Antiblack racism's position as "default" racism reinforces the fact that hypervisibility does not prevent erasure. Counterintuitively, the hypervisibility of antiblack racism is what leads to this erasure: it is so normalised to be antiblack that this sentiment is utilised by oppressed populations as a way to be seen as assimilated and white.

Challenging these default notions of antiblackness and hierarchical relations is necessary to mobilize just practices of media parity. Critical race theory addresses black suffering by tracing a genealogy of the black structural condition to argue for the fungibility of black bodies.<sup>19</sup> In elucidating the nature of antiblackness, Jared Sexton writes,

Multiracialism cuts its teeth on the denial of this fundamental social truth: not simply that antiblackness is longstanding and ongoing but also that it is unlike other forms of racial oppression in qualitative ways—differences of kind, rather than degree, a structural singularity rather than an empirical anomaly.<sup>20</sup>

Sexton argues that the historical and ongoing manifestations of antiblackness in America, from the dehumanizing traumas of slavery, Jim Crow, the Drug War, and the prison

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982-997; Mindiola Jr, Tatcho, Yolanda Flores Niemann, and Nestor Rodriguez. *Black-brown relations and stereotypes*. University of Texas Press, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> King, C. Richard. "Borrowing power: Racial metaphors and pseudo-Indian mascots." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4.1 (2004): 189-209.

<sup>19</sup> See Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and social death*. Harvard University Press, 1982; Wilderson III, Frank. "Gramsci's black marx: whither the slave in civil society?." *Social Identities* 9.2 (2003): 225-240.

<sup>20</sup> Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation schemes: Antiblackness and the critique of multiracialism*. U of Minnesota Press, 2008. P. 245.

industrial complex is incomparable to what has been endured by any other marginalised racial group in this country. For Sexton, the exceptionalism of antiblackness does not arise from it being a “worse” form of oppression than others. Rather, it is the foundational role that antiblackness plays in the construction of white supremacy that makes it indispensable.

Frank B. Wilderson furthers Sexton’s argument concerning the dehumanization of black bodies by saying that history has always framed them as non-human and it is this “structural antagonism” within American civil society that must be addressed before the construction of antiblackness can be understood and confronted.<sup>21</sup> In responding to the ideas of Sexton and Wilderson, Fred Moten contends that this framework overly emphasises the antagonism between blackness and humanity, reducing black subjectivity to the limited by-product of racial slavery and black agency to the untroubled replication of existing social structures, further reifying black suffering.<sup>22</sup>

In a reflection on black subjecthood and the creation of the subject, Anthony Farley writes,

The image of the black is ubiquitous. Whites return and return and return again to this fetish in order to satisfy a self-created urge to be white. The satisfaction of this will-to-whiteness is a form of pleasure in and about one’s body. It is a pleasure which is satisfied through the production, circulation, and consumption of images of the not-white. The body is contested territory in the conflict over symbolic representation. “Nothing exists in itself;” whiteness composes itself out of images of blackness. Whiteness is pleasure which has woven itself into all aspects of our culture and our identities.<sup>23</sup>

Farley notes that the inferior black body is juxtaposed with a superior whiteness to preserve the submissive and dominant roles of each. Striking images of fetishization allow for a complete distancing from normalised images of American belonging and agency, encouraging the viewer to associate the image with foreignness thus easily rejecting it. This idea of a “separate” blackness is echoed in the writing of Toni Morrison

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<sup>21</sup> Wilderson III, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Moten, Fred. “The Case of Blackness.” *Criticism* 50.2 (2008): 177-218.

<sup>23</sup> Farley, Anthony Paul. “Black Body as Fetish Object, The.” *Or. L. Rev.* 76 (1997): 457.

who states, "In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American."<sup>24</sup> Morrison observes that potential pride in ethnic differentiation was traded for racial privileges afforded by courting whiteness. This was an easy swap to make when the benefits of whiteness were reiterated time and again while the absence of agency and personhood associated with blackness was made unpalatable.

David Roediger describes these benefits as the "psychological wages of whiteness" which are significant enough to overcome other pressing concerns such as class issues. For example, the desire for an identifiable non-black identity was strong enough that working class whites of the 1930s working at the docks fought to deny their fellow black workers union privileges and access to jobs in order not to have their racial privilege questioned.<sup>25</sup> Herbert Gans argues that white self-interest encourages a redefinition of its boundaries to non-white populations when it appears that privileges are at stake.<sup>26</sup> Achieving whiteness for immigrants includes a necessary indifference towards black Americans.

The binary construction of American identity as a white/black divide has led to calls for studies of race to move "beyond blackness", an argument that appears to have merit. However, this notion is problematised by Katerina Deliovsky and Tamari Kitossa who argue that,

First, by misreading and misnaming a real historical and contemporary experience as a paradigm, the discourse creates the false dilemma of needing to move beyond. Second, the discourse sets up blackness ... and by extension, those people socially defined as "black," as an impediment to the laudable goals of a multiracial coalition and complex understanding of race relations in North America.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Morrison, Toni. "On the Back of Blacks," *Time* 142 (Fall 1993): 57.

<sup>25</sup> Roediger, David R. *The wages of whiteness: Race and the making of the American working class*. Verso, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Gans, Herbert J. "The possibility of a new racial hierarchy in the twenty-first century United States." *The cultural territories of race: Black and white boundaries* (1999): 371-390.

<sup>27</sup> Deliovsky, Katerina, and Tamari Kitossa. "Beyond Black and White: When Going Beyond May Take Us Out of Bounds." *Journal of Black Studies* (2013): 0021934712471533.

What Eduardo Bonilla-Silva proposes instead of decentering blackness is a consideration of methods that would allow for the significance of colourism. He suggests the conception of a caste-like system as a way to understand the racial hierarchy of the United States.<sup>28</sup> It acknowledges the emergence of an “honorary white” collective which includes middle-class Latinos and Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Arab Americans. The lowest social caste comprises “African Americans, African and West Indian origin immigrants, dark-skinned and poor Latinos, reservation-bound Native Americans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Laotians.”<sup>29</sup> The middle group becomes the buffer between the bottom and top of the social order. To the extent that this group is complicit in the social arrangement, they receive some honorary white status including more power/privilege than those groups relegated to the bottom. Like European immigrants, they benefit from the “psychological wages of whiteness” as they distance themselves from blackness.<sup>30</sup>

### **Critical race theory**

This thesis most consistently draws on the principles outlined in critical race theory. In interrogating the post-racial moment, critical race theory provides an essential framework for reading race in cultural texts. Critical race theory is interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. It broadens the perspective of ethnic studies discourse by contextualizing it through factors like history, economic conditions, and group- and self-interest. It eschews incremental progress in favour of questioning the presumed foundations of the liberal order. This theory partially derives its approach of fluid interpretation from “legal indeterminacy” which allows for multiple outcomes of a case by emphasizing one line of authority over another, or construing a fact differently from one’s opposition. It also builds on feminism’s insights

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<sup>28</sup> Here Bonilla-Silva expands on his theory of a racialised social system (1997) which “refers to societies in which economic, political, social and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races.” Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. “Rethinking racism: Toward a structural interpretation.” *American sociological review* (1997): 465-480.

<sup>29</sup> Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and Karen S. Glover. “We are all Americans”: The Latin Americanization of race relations in the United States.” *The changing terrain of race and ethnicity* (2004): 149-183.p.3

<sup>30</sup> In considering the complexities of these inter-group dynamics, Ronald Takaki writes about the need to engage in a comparative study of ethnicity: “Like many other scholars, I had parcelled out white attitudes toward different groups almost as if there were not important similarities and differences in the ways whites imaged and treated them. Yet I knew that the reality of white America’s experience was dynamically multiracial. What whites did to one racial group had direct consequences for others. And whites did not artificially view each group in a vacuum; rather, in their minds, they lumped the different groups together or counterpointed them against each other.” Takaki, Ronald T. *Iron cages: Race and culture in 19th-century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.



into the relationship between power and the social construction of roles, as well as the unseen and unrecognised collection of patterns that make up structures of domination.<sup>31</sup>

In critical race theory, racism is viewed as an ordinary (non-aberrational) occurrence, making it difficult to address directly, let alone cure. Colourblind conceptions of equality, expressed in rules that insist on uniform treatment of individuals without consideration of difference, only seek to quash discrimination of the most egregious sort. The concept of material determinism adds a further dimension to white-over-colour ascendancy – as racism advances the interests of white elites as well as the working-class, there is little incentive for most of society to eradicate it.

The “social construction” basis of this theory holds that race is not objective, and rather than being an inherent biological reality, is a product of social thought and relations. Society invents and manipulates racial categories when it is convenient for the majority. Shared physical traits based on a common origin constitute only a small portion of people’s genetic attributes and bear little relation to higher traits like intelligence and moral behaviour. The dismissal of scientific facts allows society to create races and endow individuals with generalised and fixed characteristics.

Critical race scholars are also concerned with differential racialization and its consequences. The dominant society racialises different minority groups at different times in response to shifting needs. Differential racialization is tied to the notion of anti-essentialism which acknowledges that individuals are not unitary beings but rather possess overlapping and potentially conflicting identities and allegiances. Coexisting with the idea of anti-essentialism, the theory’s voice-of-colour thesis holds that because of the variation in racial minorities’ histories and experiences with oppression, people of colour possess a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.

The methodology used by critical race theorists calls for attentiveness to equity when carrying out research, scholarship, and practice. Since its inception in the mid-1980s, critical race theory has generated a broad transdisciplinary movement toward race equity based on knowledge production that seeks to transform the hierarchies identified through research. Most significantly, scholarship produced by critical race

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<sup>31</sup> Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical race theory: An introduction*. NYU Press, 2012.

theory has expanded the vocabulary for discussing racial phenomena and “incorporate[d] the knowledge of racial and ethnic minority communities regarding marginality.”<sup>32</sup> Critical race theory challenges the popular but erroneous belief that the non-recognition of racial difference is synonymous with the absence of racism. Where this idea of colourblindness precludes explicit examination of racism’s potential contributions to inequities, critical race theory instead argues that “race consciousness” is essential for understanding racialised constructs.

As mass media continue to transform, the need to study the narratives of minority voices in media environments has increased in importance because it is a way to offer alternatives to imagining racial dynamics. This idea of “counter story-telling” through new media is a growing aspect of critical race theory. Solorzano and Yosso define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told.”<sup>33</sup> These narratives can be used to expose, analyse, as well as challenge deeply-entrenched narratives and characterizations of privilege by foregrounding the experiences of often-marginalised groups. This promotes their sense of social, political and cultural cohesion by illuminating social realities. In examining the counter-narratives presented by non-white media creators, the discourse of dominant culture can be altered and prevented from taking precedence in public consciousness.

Counter-narratives challenge the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority. The counter-story exposes, analyses and challenges the majoritarian narrative of privilege by acting as a crucial theoretical, methodological and pedagogical tool to focus on “the intersections of oppression because storytelling is racialised, gendered, and classed and these stories affect racialised, gendered, and classed communities.”<sup>34</sup> Critical race theory poses and seeks to answer the question that if discourse is shaped by the heard, what becomes of the unheard?

Through this understanding of critical race theory, this thesis explores how media content creators work to re-envision a sense and definition of community. This conversation can inspire or reject new vehicles for inclusionary racial practices while

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<sup>32</sup> Ford, Chandra L., and Collins O. Airhihenbuwa. "Critical race theory, race equity, and public health: toward antiracism praxis." *American Journal of Public Health* 100.supplement 1 (2010): S30-S35.

<sup>33</sup> Solorzano, Daniel G., and Tara J. Yosso. "Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research." *Qualitative inquiry* 8.1 (2002): 23-44.

<sup>34</sup> Solorzano and Yosso, 2002, p.28.

confronting the facts of persistent racial inequalities in the United States and the ways in which culture bypasses or denies race as an adequate means of making sense of discrimination.

### **Obama and the post-racial moment**

In the wake of the 2016 election results and the new reality of President Donald Trump, the halcyon days of humouring the possibility of an America unbounded by race have been left in the dust. Yet, the idea of a post- world, a world beyond the concerns of what is often referred to dismissively as identity politics, remains more potent than ever, occupying an uneasy space alongside the aggressively racialised discourse that Trump has pushed to the forefront of culture. A rich and useful body of scholarship has emerged, unpacking the meanings of the “post-racial” and exploring the political and affective quality of its allure.<sup>35</sup> The Obama moment was not the origin but rather the catalyst of what David Theo Goldberg has called “the neoliberalization of race”<sup>36</sup>, crystallizing the structure of the American racial imaginary around erasure disguised as absence. This thesis recognises that Asian American creative cultural output can provide unique perspectives on race, and will thus draw on the insights from close readings of Asian American television shows as they navigate the post-racial landscape. These readings are necessarily framed by the complex and much examined history and experiences of black Americans in the media, and I will therefore also consider a number of shows by black creators in conversation with Asian American narratives. In many ways, the imagined Asian American experience typifies an idealised post-racial existence – visible enough to add diversity to the conversation, but silent/silenced enough not to challenge the status quo.

Though seemingly a construction of the contemporary moment, the seeds of the post-racial can be traced back to U.S. Supreme Court decisions from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in which the court exhorted that black Americans should not be “the special favourite of

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<sup>35</sup> See Harvey Wingfield, A. & Feagin, J. (2009) *Yes We Can? White Racial Framing and the 2008 Presidential Campaign*, New York, Routledge; Alexander, M. (2010) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colourblindness*, New York, New Press. Dawkins, M. (2010) ‘Mixed messages: Barack Obama and post-racial politics’, *Spectator*, Fall, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 9–17; Kennedy, R. (2012) *The Persistence of the Colour Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency*, New York, Vintage; Higginbotham, F. M. (2013) *Ghosts of Jim Crow: Ending Racism in Post-racial America*, New York, NYU Press.

<sup>36</sup> Goldberg, D. T. (2009) *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell.

the laws". The non-consideration of the special circumstances of black Americans, barely a decade after the abolishment of slavery, was based on the principle that it was necessary to think of them as "mere citizens" in order to untangle the complications of presiding over racial dilemmas.<sup>37</sup>

In his seminal monograph tracing the "racial break" in history, *The World is a Ghetto*, Howard Winant explains that the first phase of this break, which began after World War II and peaked in the 1960s, triggered a shift in a centuries-old worldwide racial system.<sup>38</sup> Unfolding across a breadth of progressive antiracism movements like anti-colonialism, anti-apartheid, and America's own civil rights movement, this break posed challenges to white supremacist practices on a heretofore unimagined scale, laying out demands to the state and its people. By the 1970s however, a second phase took shape in the consolidation of a "new racial common sense"<sup>39</sup>. Some demands of the antiracist movements were met, but equally as crucial, an insidious co-opting of reformation paradigms was popularised. The overt racisms borne from the ideological structures of white supremacy were made softer – but no less violent in their impact and animus – and repacked racial democracy into a politically palatable centrist vision that acquiesced to America's nationalist and neoliberal demands.<sup>40</sup>

Jodi Melamed outlines the transitions from "racial liberalism" in the mid-1940s through the 1960s to "liberal multiculturalism" across the 1980s and the 1990s to "neoliberal multiculturalism" over the 2000s, revealing the inclusion of state-sanctioned antiracisms into American life.<sup>41</sup> Hitching racial to colourblind denials of racial privilege and stigma watered down radical visions of antiracism and posited neat resolutions of racial conflict that were restricted and contained to liberal political terrain.

The emergence of post-race in the 2008 Obama moment consolidates a third phase within the racial break. If colourblindness was premised on the strategic

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<sup>37</sup> See Barnes, M. L., Chemerinsky, E., & Jones, T. (2010) 'A post-race equal protection?' *Georgetown Law Journal*, vol. 98, pp. 967–1004; Hutchinson, D. L. (2009) 'Racial exhaustion', *Washington University Law Review*, vol. 86, no. 4, pp. 917–974; Norton, H. (2010) 'The Supreme Court's post-racial turn towards a zero-sum understanding of equality', *William and Mary Law Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, pp. 197–259.

<sup>38</sup> Winant, H. (2002) *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II*, New York, Basic.

<sup>39</sup> Winant, 2002, pp. 175–176.

<sup>40</sup> Winant, 2002, p. 173.

<sup>41</sup> Melamed, Jodi (2011) *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press.

submersion of white privilege and its operations, the post-racial cannot move forward without recognition of racial differences, but only to underscore their lessening significance in both white and non-white life experiences. Thus, if colourblindness operated on “amalgams of wishful thinking, studied denials, scripted declarations, and tortured performances”<sup>42</sup>, the post-racial firmly re-envisioned racial differences as being divested of consequence for those willing to commit themselves as properly neoliberal subjects.

In its third phase, the racial break assesses difference as rational instead of racial, and normalises structural inequality as essential to the neoliberal state’s security and welfare. Moving racialization away from the logic of colour, the post-racial circulates “permissible narratives of difference tailored to suit national ideologies while it legitimises violence, erasure and censure against norm violators.”<sup>43</sup> By recognizing some racial differences while minimizing or delegitimizing others, it confers privileges on certain racial subjects while stigmatizing others. For example, the sympathetic white liberal, the cautiously multicultural American, and the fully assimilated black person are lauded but extremes on either end of racial awareness – the overtly racist and the “excessively” race-conscious – are discarded as antagonistic relics. The post-racial codes human beings into regimes of social value and bars those who resist codification from participation in the practices of living.

Post-race maps grand narratives of racial progress to justify American exceptionalism and domestic moral panic as it authorises adjustments in the privilege/stigma divide. Post-racial discourse, in propagating false notions of consent to oversight – with non-consent resulting in significant detriment to quality of life, and consent itself being no guarantee of comfort – positions itself as arbiter of racial “extremisms” to contain the threat of racial protest from all sides. The defanged antiracist paradigms of the post-racial serve to paint as strange and unthinkable alternative and more radical antiracist paradigms to render as natural and fair a racial common sense that is tailored to the interests of contemporary capital. Returning to Obama’s victory, then, it becomes apparent that the naturalness and ease with which vast constituencies

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<sup>42</sup> Crenshaw, K. (1997) ‘Colour-blind dreams and racial nightmares: reconfiguring racism in the post-civil rights era’, in *Birth of a Nation ‘Hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Trial*, eds. T. Morrison and C. Brodsky LaCour, New York, Pantheon, p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> Melamed, 2011, pp. 13–14

of liberal voters constructed the candidate's significance as specifically post-racial are a result of the shifts in the racial common sense outlined above.

Post-race made an early appearance in public discourse in the 1970s as a cultural keyword, a site "at which the meaning of social experience is negotiated and contested."<sup>44</sup> Exerting power and potency, keywords enjoy a "special potency to say what counts as 'true'"<sup>45</sup> and enshrine certain interpretations of social life as authoritative. Equally, however, post-race exists in constant state of turmoil, perpetually on the precipice of an existential joke. Turning on studied denials and wishful thinking in light of grim evidence of the ways that race remains an abiding axis of savage inequality, the keyword has remained open to the lash of scorn and ridicule, at once absurd and alluring.

While the post-racial has been articulated in a multitude of ways – political commentaries in national papers, interviews and speeches by public figures, art exhibits, think tank agendas, etc. – this thesis focuses on its deployment in popular culture, covering a range of voices speaking from varying positions of Asian American subjecthood. This analysis maps crescendos and silences, profusions as well as pauses as they reveal themselves within a cross-section of media to parse the influences of the post-racial on key shifts in the minority experiences of the racial order.

### **Post-racial representations in the media**

In the United States, stereotypes perpetuated through cultural productions do not exist in a vacuum. The continued societal reinforcement of the antagonistic discourse of competing oppressions reflects an intentional misunderstanding of how white hegemony works. Representations in popular culture have meaningful implications because they often become conflated with populist sentiment and enacted through practical policies. These representations can therefore influence the treatment of marginalised communities in real and observable ways. Contemporary television is furthering the understanding of a "true" American subjecthood as reliant on navigations towards

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<sup>44</sup> Fraser, N. & Gordon, L. (1994) 'A genealogy of dependency: tracing a keyword of the US welfare state', *Signs*, vol. 19, pp. 309–336

<sup>45</sup> Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972/1977*, New York, Pantheon, p. 131.

whiteness by creating content that operates within a structural framework of racial inequity.

In identifying how televisual mediations of the post-racial shift the landscape of cultural production and play significant roles in forming new conceptualizations of race, this thesis locates racial discourse within a media that rests uneasily on racial silence. Discussions of race and representation in the media often leave out the question of racial hierarchy as a black/white dichotomy is centered. This project takes the complexities of racial hierarchization seriously by examining various models of interrogating the raced subject through readings of the post-racial self. I conduct close readings of the television programs *The Mindy Project* (FOX, 2012 – 2017), *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC, 2015 – present), *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014 – present), *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015 – present), *Dr. Ken* (ABC, 2015 – present), *Atlanta* (FX, 2015 – present) and *Insecure* (HBO, 2015 – present).

These shows fall broadly under the rubric of the post-racial and represent new approaches to representation in the media. Each of these shows, whether directly or otherwise, considers the implications of racial stratification and how it unfolds in a post-racial fantasy. They confront and complicate straightforward readings of race, specifically through problematised representations of model minority and antiblack tropes. This thesis examines how content creators engage with those tropes as well as the processes that allow racial identities to be created and pitted against one another in popular culture in order to perpetuate homogenizing ideas of valid identity expression.

The fiction of “post-race” has been especially lobbied for in the traditionally populist medium of television. Television enables the legal, social, and cultural discourse of racial insignificance upon which the post-racial hinges to permeate American society. As Thornton observes, “A key marker of America's definitive entry into the so-called “post-race” era is the fact that we no longer congratulate ourselves on the quantity of popular television representations of racial diversity we consume, but on our blasé reception of these images.”<sup>46</sup> This relatively newfound breeziness towards race is a tacit declaration that it is no longer necessary to take racism seriously. Post-raciality trades on safe and unthreatening portrayals of diversity as a way to erase the historical and political

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<sup>46</sup> Thornton, Davi Johnson. “Psych's comedic tale of black–white friendship and the lighthearted affect of “post-race” America.” *Critical studies in media communication* 28.5 (2011): 424-449.

weight of race. Visual evidence of integration's success eases white guilt without requiring actual corrective action.

The end of Jim Crow laws sparked an era of non-white cultural and racial pride. Americans of colour took up the cause for equitable representation on the big and small screens. However, the emerging television market of the 1950s operated within the premise of creating an image of American-ness that would resonate with working-class white viewers.<sup>47</sup> To accomplish this, a sense of identifiableness needed to be present in order for the audience to empathize. One way of doing this was to focus on what was presumed to be the universally felt sentiment of racial distinction and superiority, the technique of "crafting homogeneity out of difference."<sup>48</sup> Herman Gray describes television's challenge of maintaining the white hegemonic structures during the late 1960s:

Culturally, race was threatening and disruptive. Threatening, that is, to the logic of a universal, normative, and invisible whiteness on which the national imaginary depended. This threat required management at the level of television's response (both representational and industrial) and at the level of scholarly and journalist discourse that provided the principal account of how to imagine the nation. Integration did this work. The discourse of integration was deeply rooted in the logic of assimilation, which, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, was codified into a social project of colourblindness, a legal project of equal opportunity, and a moral project of individualism and self-responsibility.<sup>49</sup>

Integration on television placed all individuals on equal footing by reinscribing the accessibility of the American Dream. Television educated citizens on true Americanness by transforming difference into the shared coveting of normative whiteness.

Contemporary ethnic representation on television has long concerned itself with quantity over quality but a growing roster of characters of colour has not led to more authentic depictions of diversity. Instead, variations on the same few stereotypes appear

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<sup>47</sup> Gray, Herman. *Watching race: Television and the struggle for "blackness"*. U of Minnesota Press, 1995 (p. 127).

<sup>48</sup> Gray, Herman. *Cultural moves: African Americans and the politics of representation*. Vol. 15. Univ of California Press, 2005 (p. 6).

<sup>49</sup> Gray, 2005, p. 101.



over and over. The cultural specificity and depth of individuation of characters of colour is overlooked as a numbers-based visibility is promoted. Speaking to mostly white female creative personnel about representation, Linda Seger asks,

Do women want to simply change the character name of “Judy” to “Lupita” or cast an African American as Mary Smith? Do they want to say everyone is human underneath and make sure their characters are just like all the other characters? No, said these women, who emphasize that characters need to be both universal and culturally specific. They need to express the full range of humanity and at the same time illustrate that ethnic background does add important details that have the potential to create fascinating, original characters.<sup>50</sup>

If television’s role is to exhibit “a degree of resonance with the dominant cultural mood”<sup>51</sup>, the paradox of “universal and culturally specific” becomes readily apparent. The problem is that accomplishing this becomes a case of essentializing ethnicity because there is not enough time and space to accurately signify a character’s ethnic background and racial experiences. This is because doing so would demand an inclusion of experiences of strife and expression, and could potentially compromise a character’s relatability as viewers oscillate between fascinated and feeling accused. Television responds to the neo-liberal desire for images of racial diversity situated within a general disavowal of structural racism. The white middle-class demographic responds to images of diversity that un-races its members and validates the end of racism by providing visible evidence of race-neutral socio-political arrangements.

As contemporary television attempts to expand its racial lexicon through post-raciality, the construction of rhetoric and images of diversity on television today centres the black/white binary which allows for the acknowledgement of racial category as an identifier without engaging in the actual work of creating and confronting race, forcing characters of colour on television to inhabit the contradictory space of “representative/individual”. The fiction of pleasurable racial differentiation elides the complexities that arise when disparate ethnic communities interact with each other. The tensions that exist in the negotiation of these relationships are ignored in order to

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<sup>50</sup> Seger, Linda. *When women call the shots: The developing power and influence of women in television and film*. Henry Holt & Company, 1996.),176

<sup>51</sup> (Gray, 1995, p. 60)

position the navigation of and towards whiteness as the central defining factor in identity formation.

This thesis examines how creatives of colour are currently complicating this. Through critical race theory's conception of transformative knowledge and its impact on hierarchies, this project explores how contemporary cultural productions are writing back against established narratives. In prioritizing the consumption of visibility while avoiding particularism and "overtly speaking race,"<sup>52</sup> television sets the stage for extradiegetic readings and explications by marginalised groups to address the critical issues of inter- and intra-group relations beyond simplistic divisions of white/black/other.

### **Defining 'Asian American'**

Part of rejecting the aforementioned divisions is recognising that the dearth of data on a consistent Asian American experience can be attributed to the fact that no such monolithic entity exists. Complications in defining the boundaries of a population under study that defies a cohesive label often prevent Asian Americans from being conceptualized as part of the American mainstream. This thesis intends to contribute to an understanding of Asian Americanness that is fluid and not-essentializing. I avoid fixed definitions of what constitutes Asian American and instead, through close reading, allow the texts and their creators to map out their own networks of identity. In line with Kandice Chuh's (2003) call to name Asian American as a situational category, this thesis thus approaches Asian American as an identity shaped by media narratives and imagined communities.

In the edited anthology, *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, Mimi Nguyen and Thuy Tu suggest a 'subjectless' approach to Asian American studies in order to sidestep debates over authenticity and essentialism that tend to overshadow critical engagement with Asian Americans and texts from the cultures:

We argue that Asian American can be conceived as a marker of historical subjects, an axis of subordination, and a strategic coalition without presuming that it

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<sup>52</sup> Chidester, Phil. "May the circle stay unbroken: Friends, the presence of absence, and the rhetorical reinforcement of whiteness." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25.2 (2008): 157-174.

functions as a foundational property of our 'selves'. This does not mean that we cannot speak of the experiences of Asian Americans, but that we must account for the ways in which these political and cultural activities are linguistically managed, socially constructed, and tactically deployed.<sup>53</sup>

In use for decades as a racial category for government classification, the 'Asian' American population is one of the fastest-growing and most diverse demographic groups in the United States but the socioeconomic outcomes for various national-origin groups are often starkly different outcomes. A lack of disaggregated data makes it difficult to assess the states of the distinct subgroups of the Asian American community. With these limitations in mind, this thesis uses Asian American as a descriptor broadly applied to and claimed by those with South Asian and East Asian heritage.

Designating Asian Americans as a single group is the result of a shared history of being treated in a similar manner throughout America's history under the tenet of Orientalism, which proposed that people migrating from the continent of Asia, imagined here as a singular and indistinguishable place, had an innate connection to each other and should be treated alike. The boundaries of who is seen or passes as Asian American both in the present and in the past are open to manipulation based on changing ideas of who and what was Oriental. Thus, in the literature reviews of Asian American history in this thesis, the complex and overlapping experiences of these ethnicities are first read through the lens of the generalized Other in order to then form a particular understanding of non-whiteness as mitigated on contemporary American television through specific Asian American stories.

I recognize that Southeast Asians fall under this 'Oriental' rubric as well but as the research is focused on cultural products that have Asian Americans behind the scenes and not simply in front of it, the fact that no shows on American television were produced by Southeast Asian Americans during the course of my research means that they are not represented in this work. This absence is itself of interest given the history of Filipinx and Vietnamese migration to the United States – fourth and sixth largest respectively<sup>54</sup> – the

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<sup>53</sup> Nguyen, Mimi Thi and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu. *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*. Duke University Press, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Zong, Jie, et al. Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States. 2 Mar. 2017, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states).

lack of its people in positions of influence and visibility in the media reflects an existing hierarchy in how Asian Americanness is perceived and categorized. The model minority myth, though double edged, still provides a measure of respectability to those deemed able to embody it, namely South Asian and East Asian Americans, whose work features primarily in this thesis. Southeast Asian Americans in the American popular culture imagination seems limited to the history of conflict on the continent, with significant filmic representation in narratives of war and trauma.

Similarly maligned as focal points of violence and barbarousness, Muslim identity has undergone its own specific racialization in post-9/11 American media that reads Muslim-ness onto ambiguously brown bodies and casts them in roles that amplify this perceived threat. Popular modern representations of Muslims are part fictional, occasionally evaluative, and largely crafted to fuel state-sanctioned Islamophobia. The media took note as President George W. Bush distinguished between Arab and Muslim “friends” and “enemies,” stating “the enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them.”<sup>55</sup> Portrayals of Muslims have since come to rely heavily on the dichotomization of sympathetic/identifiable Muslims (e.g. victims of mistaken hate crimes) vs. obvious terrorist aggressors, opposing but necessarily complementary roles that require a sombre approach.<sup>56</sup> As such, interrogation of Muslim identities have tended to take place in the genre of drama and not comedy.<sup>57</sup> Therefore although examining the ways in which Muslims are racialized across ethnic heritage and geographical background is an important project, the texts in this thesis only ever marginally engage with this specific question of post-racial non-white representation, if

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<sup>55</sup> The Washington Post, WP Company, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html).

<sup>56</sup> According to Evelyn Alsultany, “[A]t the same time that sympathetic portrayals of Arab and Muslim Americans proliferated on US commercial television in the weeks, months, and years after 9/11, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001.” Alsultany, Evelyn. “Arabs and Muslims in the media after 9/11: Representational strategies for a “postrace” era.” *American Quarterly* 65.1 (2013): 161-169, p. 164.

<sup>57</sup> Efforts to buck stereotypes of Muslims are often overwhelmed by the momentum of the current representational scheme. Arab and Muslim characters in contexts free from terrorism remain unusual in American commercial media. The only post-9/11 sitcom to feature a Muslim main character, CW’s *Aliens in America*, never quite took off with audiences and was cancelled after one season in 2008. Murray, Noel. “For One Sweet Season, Aliens In America Found Comedy in a Conflict between Faiths.” TV Club, [Tv.avclub.com](http://Tv.avclub.com), 2 May 2016, [tv.avclub.com/for-one-sweet-season-aliens-in-america-found-comedy-in-1798246888](http://tv.avclub.com/for-one-sweet-season-aliens-in-america-found-comedy-in-1798246888).

at all, and thus the issue of Muslim identity only appears briefly in Chapter Four's discussion of Aziz Ansari and *Master of None*.

### **Asian Americans in the United States**

Visibility in an American context has historically been negotiated through whiteness. Studies of the country's early immigrant population – e.g. Irish, Italian and Jewish Americans, groups that can now make uncontroversial claims to white identity – show that they began life in the United States in “coloured” spaces before being granted entry into whiteness.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary American society continues to witness and participate in the constant revision of the meaning of whiteness, a push-and-pull of rejection and acceptance catalysed by the concern for white survival. This contestation has been a source of discomfort as it forces the acknowledgment that the boundaries of what is/is not white are unfixed.

The complexities of whiteness and its attendant privileges have received much attention and consideration, yet when discussion of the tiers of privilege within minority communities themselves arise, the pejorative term “Oppression Olympics”<sup>59</sup> is often used to dismiss legitimate concerns surrounding issues of race, amongst others. Andrea Smith proposes a counter measure to this by suggesting a reframing for women of colour and people of colour organizing that she calls “The Three Pillars of White Supremacy”. Slavery/Capitalism simultaneously commodifies and devalues black bodies as contributive labour and un-agencied property, treating them as illogical and equated with servitude; the logic of Genocide/Colonialism rests on the disappearance of indigenous peoples to make way for the rightful claims of non-natives, viewing native irrationality as a barrier to cultivating and benefiting from the land; and Orientalism/War relies on the looming threat of the inferior Other as a means of justifying a perpetual state of inter- and

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<sup>58</sup> Roediger, David R. *Working toward whiteness: How America's immigrants became white: The strange journey from Ellis Island to the suburbs*. Basic Books, 2006. European populations being able to shed their black oppressive status through perseverance has long been a fiction manipulated to imply that the assimilative failure of African Americans lies in the community's intrinsic problems. Racially inferior immigrants' transformation and self-extraction from low racial statuses was an indictment of black Americans who struggled to do the same.

<sup>59</sup> Hancock, Ange-Marie. *Solidarity politics for Millennials: A guide to ending the oppression olympics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

intra-state conflict, stating barbarism and uncivility of people of colour as constant foreign threats that needed to be neutralised.<sup>60</sup>

Smith's work recognises that surviving within the confines of white supremacy is complicated by the fact that tactics of resistance have been defined by white supremacy itself. Victimization imposed on all minorities does not preclude complicity in oppression. Smith's alternative model of liberation offers strategies that fight against re-creating models of oppression. In foregrounding the seductive prospect of modulating towards whiteness, Smith's writing brings up the question of complicity. Extracting complicity, through tactics subtle and overt, is part of the formation of "good" and "bad" performances of race and citizenship. Writing about America's "master narrative" of the good immigrant, William Darity notes:

By dint of hard work, commitment to the value of education, acceptance of delayed gratification, and a cultural orientation toward achievement, each new wave of ethnic immigrants would ride to the top of the urban escalator. Higher income, engagement in broad social and political participation, and assimilation into Americanness was available to all who entered the country if they had the desire and determination. Thus, the master narrative stands as a paean to the possibility of upward mobility open to all who come to America.<sup>61</sup>

U.S. immigration policies have historically favoured immigrants with pre-existing skills and higher levels of education, easing their integration into white hegemonic structures and systems. The narrative of the model minority overlooks the fact that the Asian American community is largely self-selected, stemming from a pool of voluntary migrants to the United States who have tended to be those with the skills and money needed to leave their country of origin. Scholars have observed that Asian immigrants to America are largely drawn from the occupational and educational elite in their countries of origin.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, Andrea. "Heteropatriarchy and the three pillars of white supremacy." *Incite* (2006): 66-73.

<sup>61</sup> Darity, William. "Stratification economics: the role of intergroup inequality." *Journal of Economics and Finance* 29.2 (2005): 144-153.

<sup>62</sup> See Hing, Bill Ong. *Making and remaking Asian America through immigration policy: 1850-1990*. Stanford University Press, 1994; Palumbo-Liu, David. *Asian/American: Historical crossings of a racial frontier*. Stanford University Press, 1999. Bhatia, Sunil. "9/11 and the Indian diaspora: Narratives of race, place and immigrant identity." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29.1 (2008): 21-39.

The Immigration Act of 1924 marked the beginning of decades of Asian immigrant exclusion. The fears of unnameable and unknowable foreign threats during the Cold War years spurred the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act which opened the doors to professional classes of Asian immigrants by instituting immigration preferences for highly skilled or technologically skilled migrants, incentivised by the promise of family reunification.<sup>63</sup> Due to the American government's careful screening of applicants for their professional capabilities and economic status, large numbers of highly skilled, highly educated new Asian immigrants entered the US population. The political, social and educational capital of these new immigrants encouraged the model minority myth, and resulted in the higher economic status of certain Asian immigrant groups, fuelling a stratification that persists to this day. Thus, the idea of success as an innate and immutable cultural trait perpetuated by the myth erases both the role of immigration legislation and the historical and social struggles of those who did not have the advantage of economically privileged forbearers.

The myth "proved" that racial "progress" by non-whites was possible. A wilful ignorance of history has made this myth a staple of white conservative race commentary since the mid-1950s. From the 1960s through to the 1980s, mainstream media touted the success of Asian Americans by filtering their representation through the prism of the myth, armed with growing amounts of anecdotal material to make the case for Asian American uplift. At the same time, President Ronald Reagan began dismantling social welfare programs, using tropes of black laziness to win public support for the further disenfranchising of black Americans, while the War on Drugs relied on churning up white fear of black crime.<sup>64</sup> By fallaciously equating the circumstances of the descendants of slaves with those of a population of largely voluntary immigrants from countries like India, South Korea, Taiwan, and China, right-wing rhetoric solidified the model minority

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<sup>63</sup> George Borjas writes, "The 1965 Amendments [to the Immigration and Nationality Act] and subsequent minor legislation repealed the national origins quota system, set a worldwide numerical limit (507,000 visas in 1996), and enshrined a new objective for awarding entry visas among the many applicants: the reunification of families." Borjas, George J. *Heaven's door: Immigration policy and the American economy*. Princeton University Press, 2001 (p. 40); see also Hing, 1994, p. 86; Okihiro, Gary Y. *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History*. Columbia University Press, 2005.

<sup>64</sup> Saidiya Hartman notes that the transatlantic slave trade intrinsically linked 'blackness' and 'criminality' in the lexicon of American society, requiring that claims of citizenship and personhood be made on the backs of black Americans whereby the desire for inclusion is articulated through a reiteration of non-blackness. Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

myth as racial common sense. Concurrently, American's ongoing restructuring of the global economy through capitalism resulted in the upwards distribution of wealth, turning the model minority into transnational currency for buying one's way into white hegemony.

Asian American narratives and experiences often revolve around the expectations of and resistances to the "model minority myth" which suggests an Asian American intellectual and cultural superiority that contrasts with stereotypes of black failure. This faulty social construct has been instilled by white hegemony and maintains power by promoting insidious tensions between already marginalised groups. It has created a link between race and the notion of success. Its values have been fashioned by American media which have uncritically adopted the role of the model minority in Asian television representation without conscious reflection on the racial project to which it belongs. The model minority myth preys on immigrant fears as they are forced to imagine their lives as part of the racial formation and seek to mediate between the dream of America and the realities of racial oppression. By placing blackness at the undesirable end of the spectrum of American selfhood, it forces other non-black people of colour to straddle tradition and the pressure of assimilation into American society while patiently bearing the brunt of subtle racism. Such ambivalence reflects the nature of living in a social context that conflates the experience of race into dichotomies of blackness and whiteness.

As a fiction invented by whiteness, the model minority myth has been used to denigrate and belittle black efforts to agitate for political equality, while simultaneously appropriating and limiting the political, social, and cultural roles that Asian Americans can inhabit. It is a potent tool of white hegemony used to justify structural racism against communities of colour. The model minority myth thus works by maintaining systems of racialised advantage and disadvantage by rewarding assimilation to whiteness and justifying the criminalization of blackness. In a post-racial landscape, the myth creates incentives for remaining silent in the face of antiblack racism while obscuring the ways that non-black people of colour have benefited from black liberation struggles and how the struggles of those communities intersect.

Asian American success is a rhetorical bludgeon used to deny the real and ongoing effects of institutional racism and white supremacy on African Americans, acting as a



deterrent to the claims of the black power and civil rights movements. The “hard-working” Chinese or Japanese were lauded and had their “success” contrasted with the systemically abetted professional “failures” of African Americans. Explicitly pitting minorities against one another became a way to deny the significance of whiteness and the hardship of exclusion from it.<sup>65</sup> For example, in his 1981 proclamation for Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week, President Ronald Reagan praised Asian Americans as follows:

Their hard work, creativity and intelligence have inspired their fellow citizens, added new dimensions to our national life and strengthened the social fabric of our land. Commonly, immigrants have come to American shores with few material possessions, relying on initiative, hard work and opportunity as the keys to success and prosperity in their new Nation. Asian and Pacific Americans have been squarely within this tradition. Overcoming great hardships, they have lived the American dream, and continue as exemplars of hope and inspiration not only to their fellow Americans, but also to the new groups of Asian and Pacific peoples who even now are joining the American family.<sup>66</sup>

This glowing description contrasts sharply with his invocation five years earlier of the black “welfare queen” straw man:

In Chicago, they found a woman who holds the record [for welfare deception]. She used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans’ benefits for four non-existent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running \$150,000 a year.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Wong, Frieda, and Richard Halgin. “The “model minority”: Bane or blessing for Asian Americans?.” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 34.1 (2006): 38-49.

<sup>66</sup> Reagan, Ronald. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1984*. Best Books on, 1986 (p. 365).

<sup>67</sup> Levin, Josh. “The Real Story of Linda Taylor, America’s Original Welfare Queen.” *Slate Magazine*, 18 Dec. 2013, [www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/history/2013/12/linda\\_taylor\\_welfare\\_queen\\_ronald\\_reagan\\_made\\_her\\_a\\_notorious\\_american\\_villain.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2013/12/linda_taylor_welfare_queen_ronald_reagan_made_her_a_notorious_american_villain.html).

President Reagan's remarks were part of a determined effort to repackage outmoded Cold War ideals in a newly multicultural society.<sup>68</sup> Political exigencies required American projection onto Asian culture of idealised immigrant behaviours as being definable as either good or bad, leaving no room for nuance. For example, the oppositional positioning of the yellow peril and model minority tropes, which are not in contradiction but rather different readings of the same traits. Echoing Andrea Smith's Orientalism/War pillar, Natsu Taylor Saito also notes that the construction of foreignness is essential to the model minority/yellow peril dichotomy. This "underlying constant...allows for the magical right-before-your-eyes transformation of the images of Asian Americans from positive to negative and back to positive again. Each of the images has been painted with the brush of foreignness, and it is this tinting that provides the continuity behind the changing values attributed to them." He observes that stereotypes of "Asian Americans as hardworking, industrious, family-oriented, and even mysterious or exotic" exist in parallel with reversed perceptions of these positive images, whereby "Hardworking and industrious become unfairly competitive; family-oriented becomes clannish; mysterious becomes dangerously inscrutable."<sup>69</sup>

Min Hyung Song names Asian Americans a "super-minority whose successes berate everyone who fails somehow to succeed."<sup>70</sup> There is thus an intractable link between Asian American valorisation and (anti-)blackness in the United States. The "model" of the myth demands an antithesis and it is in this image that an undesirable blackness is constructed. The model minority myth confers a reductive "honorary whiteness" on Asian Americans that rewards cultural and practical distancing of "black"

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<sup>68</sup> This was not the first time this had happened. Ellen Wu writes that during World War II, white liberals agonised that racism was damaging the United States' ability to fight a war for democracy against the Axis powers. The Chinese exclusion laws established in the 1870s which barred migrants from China from entering the country or becoming naturalised citizens placed America's trans-Pacific alliance with China against Japan in a precarious position. As campaigns to fight the laws began to mobilize, the Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion recognised that it would have to find a new narrative to counter the Orientalist tradition of casting Asians as "yellow peril" menaces. Wu, Ellen D. *The Colour of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. Princeton University Press, 2013 (p. 11).

<sup>69</sup> Saito, Natsu Taylor. Model Minority, Yellow Peril: Functions of "Foreignness" in the Construction of Asian American Legal Identity, 4 *ASIAN L.J.* 71, 76 (1997)

<sup>70</sup> Song, Min Hyung. "Communities of Remembrance: Reflections on the Virginia Tech Shootings and Race." *The Journal of Asian American Studies* 11:1 (2008): 1-26.

behaviour. Asian American success is used to both deny the existence of systemic racism as well as to dismiss its effects as aberrant and minimal.<sup>71</sup>

The framing of Asian American success in this way owes a debt to the neoliberal strain of thought that prioritizes individual responsibility as the prevalent mode of organising cultural and political life. In relation to the textual analysis of this thesis, this framework reveals that non-white identity is a complex concept that takes into account not only the culture of individuals but also socioeconomic variables (e.g., income, occupation, and education). Each text's representation of the principles of neoliberal capitalism, to a given extent, influences the portrayal of the central characters' identities.

This thesis engages discourses of Asian American racial difference by examining its relationship to the rise of neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology. Asian American cultural production is uniquely situated to disclose various contradictions of neoliberal mandates of self-development and self-enterprise. Engaging with the terms of neoliberal discourse is critical to an adequate understanding of race in a post-racial era of multicultural inclusion. Building on a history of non-white stratification, Asian uplift entails the production of Asian Americans as idealized subjects of a neoliberal order that white supremacy can pathologically weaponized against those racialized as black.

Regarding Asian American socioeconomic success as a disciplinary construction deployed by white America to further anti-black aims, Vijay Prashad paraphrases W. E. B. Du Bois's line regarding white America's construction of a "Negro problem" to ask South Asians and other Asian Americans, "How does it feel to be a solution"?<sup>72</sup> Prashad exhorts Asian Americans to reject this falsely constructed oppositionality and to instead cultivate progressive solidarities with other people of colour. The ethical responsibility placed on Asian Americans to "do the right thing" in response to model minority discourse is a burden of considerable weight, and as a necessary intervention, I suggest that one possible approach to this reluctant assignment is to centre a discussion of neoliberalism

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<sup>71</sup> Identifying racism as separate and discrete acts that challenge social convention instead of dominant and systemic attitudes diminishes its impact on the visibly different. Alan Freeman describes the "perpetrator perspective" as a means of constructing racism as an "intentional, albeit irrational, deviation by a conscious wrongdoer from otherwise neutral, rational, and just ways of distributing jobs, power, prestige, and wealth." This approach allows the cultural mainstream to distance itself from the fact of racism by acknowledging the existence of its occurrence as irregular and limited. Freeman, Alan. "Racism, rights and the quest for equality of opportunity: A critical legal essay." *Harv. CR-CLL Rev.* 23 (1988): 295.

<sup>72</sup> Prashad, Vijay. *The karma of brown folk.* U of Minnesota Press, 2000 (p. 137).

in relation to Asian American racialization. This prompts an examination of discourses of Asian, American, and Asian American industriousness as wrought by neoliberal ideologies that would highlight the systemic brutalization of black Americans, thus widening the scope of critical inquiry while drawing attention to interrogation of other epistemologies.

## **Chapter outline**

In this thesis, I use the term Asian American to include people of East Asian and South Asian descent. The reason for this is twofold. First, although Asian American Studies has a wide body of scholarship that teases out the nuances between such identifications that I acknowledge in my research, public discussions of post-racial issues, particularly within the media as I examine it, tend to categorize these identities together. As such, it is productive to explore how the figures within these narratives respond distinctively to this label that, in many ways, denies the specificity of experience. Second, because this thesis focuses self-crafted narratives on television shows that have been created by and feature primarily Asian American and black presences on screen, the choices restrict themselves, speaking to the limited opportunities that people of colour have to control the telling of their own stories in media.

In the first chapter, I argue that there are two readings offered by *The Mindy Project* (FOX, 2012 – present) as an archetypal post-racial show. One is a conventional and unquestioning liberal embrace of the visibility provided by Mindy Kaling's brown embodiment, while the other is a progressive and sly critique of post-racial integration. However, these positive readings are problematised when the author's extradiegetic comments are taken into consideration. I argue that while it has become unfashionable to consider authorial intent in textual studies, it is important in this case because of the unprecedented juxtaposition of Kaling's race and cultural power. The paradox is that by seriously considering Kaling's role as an auteur, the radicality of her text is lessened and the unambiguous "win" of having a brown woman in control of her image is rendered ambivalent.

In the next chapter, I examine *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014 – present) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC, 2015 – present) as shows that engage with the racialization process in the United States. Both these sitcoms address how certain communities take on racial

expectations and subvert them, as well as how failure to accommodate these expectations can cause a crisis of identity – whether in the inability to perform race correctly or through the resentment of the necessity of performing race in order to participate in American subjecthood.

Chapter Three addresses the question of authenticity and the problems of essentialism through the programs *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015 – present) and *Dr. Ken* (ABC, 2015 – 2017). Both shows problematize an essentialised prism of society by engaging in intertextual commentary on the superficiality of multiculturalism on American television. I argue that by turning subtext into text, albeit in contrasting ways, these shows attempt to subvert expectations of the insurgent potential of authenticity to varying degrees of success.

Chapter Four turns to two shows under the creative control of black Americans, namely *Atlanta* (FX, 2015 – present) and *Insecure* (HBO, 2015 – present). Here, I consider how visibility and invisibility are negotiated through the creation of self-made and self-occluding spaces. I examine what narratives and counter-narratives non-traditional cultural producers choose to highlight or deny access to through their work, as well as which audiences those narratives are designed to reach.

Using the post-racial as a lens, this thesis aims to explore the intersection of television and the advancement of claims of a “beyond race”-ness as a means of progress in contemporary American society. Critical examinations of contemporary television often concentrate on quantitative representations of marginalised groups, reflecting ideas of racial progress within liberal individualism. While the normative values of whiteness allow for television characters to exist without acknowledging racial difference, in a post-Obama world that denial becomes ever more stark and difficult to grapple with.

On television, due to the perceived neutrality of the genre – comedy as the great equalizer – sitcoms have historically been the televisual space that has been opened up most easily to non-whites. *Black-ish* received much hype in part because it marked the return of the familiar black family sitcom to network television. Over the years, there have been two major waves of such shows. The 1970s saw a flurry of sitcoms from the producer Norman Lear (*Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*), followed by another

resurgence in the mid-1980s and early 1990s on the heels of the success of *The Cosby Show* (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Family Matters*, *A Different World*). By 1997, there were 18 black sitcoms airing simultaneously on network TV. However, as shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* grew in popularity, black television shows more or less disappeared from network air until the present day, aside from the occasional outlier like Damon Wayans' *My Wife & Kids* (ABC, 2001 – 2005).

While there are currently a number of present-day dramas featuring a predominantly non-white cast, they do not have a similar cyclical history that can speak to changing understandings of race on and through American television. As such, this thesis focuses on sitcoms as sites of minority responses and resistances. This research takes into consideration available quantitative data on 'diversity' on television. In a report from October 2017, progressive nonprofit civil rights advocacy organization Colour of Change examines the relationship between black representation in the writers' room and portrayal of black characters and storylines onscreen.<sup>73</sup> The presence of black writers in the room directly affects how television shows handle racial subjects. Looking at 234 broadcast, cable and streaming scripted series from the 2016-17 season, the report titled *Race in the Writers' Room: How Hollywood Whitewashes the Stories That Shape America* found that two-thirds of the shows had no black writers in their rooms. In all, black writers accounted for just 4.8 percent of the 3,817 staffed scribes. Those writers were predominantly staffed on shows led by black showrunners, who represented just 5.1 percent of the pool. Two-thirds of those series had five or more black writers in their rooms, although all had multiple white writers as well. By contrast, 69.1 percent of white-led writers rooms had no black writers at all.

The author of the report, UCLA dean of social sciences and professor of sociology and African American studies Darnell Hunt, notes

[A]necdotal evidence suggests that the lower-level writers of colour who fulfill [the diversity program function] are rarely integrated into the creative process in any meaningful way. It appears as if some showrunners exploit the free position

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<sup>73</sup> Sun, Rebecca. "Just 4.8 Percent of TV Writers Are Black, Study Finds (Exclusive)." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 1 Nov. 2017, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/just-48-percent-tv-writers-are-black-study-finds-1053675](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/just-48-percent-tv-writers-are-black-study-finds-1053675).

as little more than temporary ‘window dressing’ to mask what would otherwise be racially homogenous rooms.<sup>74</sup>

While the showrunners I have discussed in this thesis are pushing the envelope, often at the risk of their own careers, the prevailing sentiment is echoed in an unnamed black writer’s comment in the report:

I don’t think it’s appropriate or healthy for a nonwhite person to discuss race in normal writers’ rooms because you’re just too outnumbered, and people get too defensive. The worst thing in the world is making your boss feel like a racist ... and most of these people are liberals.<sup>75</sup>

Writers rooms with few or no people of colour are identified as ‘isolated’. There are also rooms that are ‘included’ (at least three writers of colour) and ‘liberated’ (black showrunners with five or more black writers) which produce more complex or nuanced black characters and storylines that are more likely to acknowledge the continued existence of racial inequality and structural racism.

The rich vein of television material that comes from being black or brown in America has in large part been ignored because most creators and directors are white men. A recent study from the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communications that examined TV programming for a one-year period ending Aug. 31, 2015, reveals that 72% of speaking or named characters were white, 12% black, 5.8% Hispanic/Latino, 5.1% Asian, 2.3% Middle Eastern and 3.1% other.<sup>76</sup> This means that 28.3% of all speaking characters were from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, well below such groups’ proportion of the U.S. population (37.9%). While I have not included such quantitative analyses in my research on visibility, these numbers provide a useful shorthand to outline the problems with representation that continue to plague Hollywood.

The 5.1% of Asian Americans visible on screen is an amalgamation of stereotypes that contribute breadth but not depth to the character of Asian American communities.

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<sup>74</sup> Sun, 2017

<sup>75</sup> Sun, 2017

<sup>76</sup> “From C-Suite to Characters on Screen: How inclusive is the entertainment industry?” *USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism*, [annenberg.usc.edu/news/faculty-research/c-suite-characters-screen-how-inclusive-entertainment-industry](http://annenberg.usc.edu/news/faculty-research/c-suite-characters-screen-how-inclusive-entertainment-industry).

The few in positions of power are held up as examples of a successful end-point; rather than functioning as door-openers to similarly talented creatives to follow, the predominantly white American media tends point to 'exceptional' creatives of colour as proof of a functioning system of merit that rewards the deserving, erasing the multiple privileges and deterrents that do or do not allow such successes to come to fruition. If only percentages of visibility that allow for media back-patting are taken into account in diversity stock-taking, the full story can never be told. It is crucial that the authorial voice of creatives of colour be given the space to assert themselves in their own words, images, and framing, and that is what this thesis aims to use as its overarching structure. Their creations do not exist in a vacuum; they are simultaneously responses to decades of media perversions of specific stories as well as wholly new articulations of lived experiences, and to reduce this ingenuity and exploration purely to quantitative analysis flattens the momentousness of this point in media history.

Television in the millennial generation exists within the most multiracial period in American history, a period in which people are able to interact with others with wildly differing backgrounds without the need for further conscious activism. By operating within this framework, content creators are at risk of reducing social and political aspirations to consumer and individual choice. A narrow interpretation of freedom as being market-oriented as opposed to transformative in its understanding of human and communal relations and mutual responsibilities has hampered media. As part of a larger critique of the post-racial millennial approach to representation, this thesis performs textual analysis of cultural productions in order to deconstruct and productively reframe the faulty logic of post-raciality. In sum, my research aims to explore how television as an institution absorbs and maintains the mainstream liberal individualist ideas of progress through the ideology of the post-racial, considering not only how the post-racial has been used to generate a cultural sense of racial parity, but also what alternatives creatives of colour have put forth to rectify this racial ideology.



## Chapter Two: *The Mindy Project*

The representation of minorities in American popular culture does not occur in a vacuum. The way in which people of colour are characterised and ethnicised is the result of intentional decisions made by producers of media content. Critical media studies scholars have pointed out that major media outlets are under the control of white media executives who consciously reproduce dominant ideologies which subjugate racial minorities.<sup>77</sup> The choices of these executives tend to replicate stereotypes and structures embedded within the hegemonic ideologies of the American racial hierarchy. The development of this stratum has been strongly influenced by assimilative immigration trends which encourage individuals to assume 'American' qualities as a means of gaining cultural acceptance. It is this immigrant struggle to acclimatize that shapes the conflicted position of Indian Americans within the historically black-white racial formations of the United States.

In an article for the online magazine *Slate* in June 2010, Nina Shen Rastogi posed the question, "Why are there suddenly so many Indians on Television?"<sup>78</sup> Rastogi noted the growing representation of South Asians on American television, citing at least one minor or recurring character on major network shows like *The Office* (NBC, 2005 – 2013), *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006 – 2013), *Royal Pains* (USA, 2009 – present), and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007 – present). TV Guide's top 15 television shows of 2010 included four programs that featured a South Asian character or actor in a significant role – *Community* (NBC, 2009 – present), *Glee* (FOX, 2009 – 2015), *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009 – present), and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009 – 2015). Rastogi identified the popularity of the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* as a catalyst for the greater visibility of Indians in popular media, noting that South Asian characters were becoming the brown minority of choice alongside majority-white characters, allowing for racial variety without having to address the post-9/11 reality of fear that would come with casting actors of Middle

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<sup>77</sup> Bagdikian, Ben H. *The new media monopoly*. Beacon Press, 2004; Hall, Stuart, ed. *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Vol. 2. Sage, 1997; McChesney, Robert D. *The problem of the media: US communication politics in the twenty-first century*. NYU Press, 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Rastogi, Nina. 2010. Beyond Apu: Why are There Suddenly So Many Indians on Television? *Slate*, June 9. Accessed December 7, 2014 (<http://www.slate.com/id/2255937/>).

Eastern descent.<sup>79</sup> Governmental policies have also shaped the 'othered' racialization of South Asians and determined the extent to which they compare to white Americans.<sup>80</sup>

While the growing representation of Indians – as a subset of South Asians – on American television could be read as an authentic concern for diversity, I argue that the privileged status of Indian Americans in popular culture has been a result of model minority complicity in white hegemony. As Vijay Prashad notes in *The Karma of Brown Folk*:

When we [Indians] tell ourselves and others that we are great, do we mean to imply that there are some who are not so great? White supremacy judges certain people greater than others, and some are frequently denied the capacity to be great at all.<sup>81</sup>

Historically, immigrants and racial minorities have been subjected to a fluid racial hierarchy in the United States. Michael Omi and Howard Winant have observed that these racial formations are the result of social, political, and economic forces that determine the social status of racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>82</sup> These statuses have formed over time and are dependent on various social and historical circumstances. For example, the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 allowed the immigration of Asian technical professionals to the United States, resulting upward financial, professional and social mobility as a result of the educational capital they brought with them.<sup>83</sup>

It is important to understand how the growing demographic of Indian Americans is negotiating their own 'hyphenated-American' identity because it underscores the racially stratified system of the United States. The assimilation experiences of Indian

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<sup>79</sup> See Alsultany, Evelyn. "Arabs and Muslims in the media after 9/11: Representational strategies for a "postrace" era." *American Quarterly* 65.1 (2013): 161-169; Nacos, Brigitte L. and Oscar Torres-Reyna. 2007. *Fueling Out Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>80</sup> Selod, Saher and David G. Embrick. 2013. 'Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim Experience in Race Scholarship.' *Sociology Compass* 7(8): 644–55; Koshy, Susan. 2002. 'South Asians and the Complex Interstices of Whiteness.' Pp. 29–50 in *White Women in Racialised Spaces*, edited by S. Najmi and R. Srikanth. Albany, NY: SUNY Press; Desai, Jigna. 2005. 'Planet Bollywood: Indian Cinema Abroad.' Pp. 55–71 in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>81</sup> Prashad, 2000, p. 158.

<sup>82</sup> Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial formation in the United States*. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans*. Rev. ed. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998; Wu, Frank H. *Yellow: Race in America beyond black and white*. Basic Books, 2003.

Americans are relevant to understanding how America and its people treat those marked as 'other', and the extent to which those 'others' are expected to sacrifice their own identities to achieve American subjecthood. The representation of Indians in American media through generalised 'South Asian traits' is used to characterize complex communities in broad strokes and provides both a yardstick for current value and a blueprint for future acceptance. As Richard Alba and Victor Nee have argued, late twentieth century American immigrants generally have had equal chances for social success as their non-immigrant counterparts, but the experiences of these immigrants collectively have differed wildly.<sup>84</sup> These experiences are influenced by the various forms of capital that an immigrant possesses and the usefulness of that capital in economic markets. With regards to issues of representation, the experiences of second-generation American born children of first-generation immigrants are particularly salient as media generated expressions of segmented assimilation seek to explain not only differences in the social mobility of immigrant groups<sup>85</sup>, but also the differences by individuals within an immigrant group, tacitly outlining the right and the wrong ways to be American. Thus, the characterizations of Indian Americans in the media are informed in large part by the extent to which they assimilate into American society.

To understand the characterization of Indians in American media, it is useful to return to the tiered system of race mentioned in the previous chapter. Contemporary race scholars like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Joe Feagin have argued that the US racial hierarchy is developing into a three-tiered system consisting of white people at the top, black people at the bottom, and Asians in the middle as 'honorary' whites.<sup>86</sup> Asian Americans are positioned between black Americans and white Americans in terms of perceived superiority while simultaneously occupying a space outside of both groups due to their perceived foreignness. According to Mia Tuan, these differences have led to the "forever foreigner" syndrome to which Asian Americans are subjected regardless of their

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<sup>84</sup> Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee. "Remaking the American mainstream." *Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*, Cambridge, Mass./London (2003).

<sup>85</sup> Haller, William, Alejandro Portes, and Scott M. Lynch. 2011. 'Dreams Fulfilled, Dreams Shattered: Determinants of Segmented Assimilation in the Second Generation.' *Social Forces* 89(3): 733–62; Zhou, Min and Yang Sao Xiong. 2007. 'The Multifaceted American Experiences of the Children of Asian Immigrants: Lessons for Segmented Assimilation.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(6): 1119–52.

<sup>86</sup> Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2004. 'From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial: Towards a New System of Racial Stratification in the USA.' *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27(6): 931–50; Feagin, Joe. *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparation*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

immigrant or citizenship status.<sup>87</sup> However, variations in skin tone and class affect the 'whiteness' of individual Asian American positions and experiences the United States, and are influential when considering Asian character types found in American popular media.

According to Nitasha Sharma, whites 'commit' the racialization of South Asians through perpetuation of negative stereotypes and assumptions associated with this group which use obvious differences in skin colour, religion, and ethnicity as markers of difference, rendering them 'less than'.<sup>88</sup> The imposition of racialization on South Asians maintains the perceptions of this group as outside of American norms. The degree to they are racialised informs their position in American media. The stereotypes produced by this process not only serve the purpose of maintaining the perception of South Asians as foreigners in society, but are used consciously by media producers in their characterizations and ultimately reflect how South Asians are already perceived in the United States.

While representations of racial and ethnic minorities have generally improved in recent years, in that significantly fewer examples of overt caricatures can be found, subtler but equally problematic stereotypes remain. The historical trajectory of South Asian characterizations in American popular media began with sporadic appearances in films throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, early examples of which generally consisted of savage Indians in India who were defeated by white saviours.<sup>89</sup> In the 1980s, the presence of Indian characters shifted locales from the India subcontinent to an urban American environment, with Indian and South Asian characters showing up as tertiary or non-speaking characters. These characters often fulfilled the stereotype of South Asians as low-level service employee. This did not tally with the historical realities of South Asian demographics in the United States.

According to Vijay Prashad, a majority of Indian immigrants between 1966 and 1977 were highly educated with backgrounds in the STEM fields, leading to the

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<sup>87</sup> Tuan, Mia. *Forever foreigners or honorary whites? The Asian ethnic experience today*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

<sup>88</sup> Sharma, Nitasha Tamar. *Hip-hop desis: South Asian Americans, blackness, and a global race consciousness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Davé, Shilpa. *Indian accents: Brown voice and racial performance in American television and film*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013; Vera, Hernán and Andrew Gordon. *Screen saviors: Hollywood fictions of whiteness*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

recognition of 'South Asian' as a census category as well as a model minority.<sup>90</sup> It was after these early migrants and their immediate families were settled that many chose to explore the possibilities of American entrepreneurship and invest in franchises and small businesses, including fast food stores, convenience store, and motels.<sup>91</sup> Once these businesses became stable and profitable, their owners took advantage of the family reunification immigration policy of the Immigration and Nationality Act<sup>92</sup> to bring over their relatives. As more and more extended family members were able to establish themselves in America, those individuals without higher skills or education took on non-professional jobs such as taxi drivers or factory workers.

Despite beginning their journey in the United States as blue collar workers, Indian Americans who constitute less than 1% of the U.S. population are now 3% of the nation's engineers, 7% of its IT workers and 8% of its physicians and surgeons.<sup>93</sup> The gradual change in the social status of Indian Americans has been matched by a change in their status as model minorities on television, fulfilling aspirational roles like doctors, private investigators, and theoretical physicists. It is difficult to identify what led to this increase in noteworthy roles, but one likely possibility is due to the increased awareness of the high economic capital possessed by South Asian Americans, thus identifying them as a group to be coveted by advertisers. Therefore, instead of relying on 'uncivilised' stereotypes, these new representations became more in line with the model minority trope, giving an opportunity for Indian Americans to see themselves reflected more positively in American media for the first time.

Returning to Rastogi's 2010 article, the relevance of the question of why so many Indian Americans were appearing on the small screen at the time appears to have lessened several years down the line. In 2014, having maintained both its ratings and

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<sup>90</sup> Prashad, 2000, p. 75.

<sup>91</sup> Dhingra, Pawan. *Life behind the lobby: Indian American motel owners and the American Dream*. Stanford University Press, 2012; Rangaswamy, Padma. 2007. 'South Asians in Dunkin' Donuts: Niche Development in the Franchise Industry.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33(4): 671–86.

<sup>92</sup> Historically, the emphasis on family reunification in American immigration law began in that 1965 act by allotting 74% of all new immigrants allowed into the United States to family reunification visas. Those included, in descending preference, unmarried adult children of U.S. citizens (20%), spouses and unmarried children of permanent resident aliens (20%), married children of U.S. citizens (10%), and brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens over age 21 (24%). Tichenor, Daniel J. (2002). *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 216.

<sup>93</sup> Richwine, Jason. "Indian Americans: The New Model Minority." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 11 July 2012, [www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors\\_immigrants\\_minority.html](http://www.forbes.com/2009/02/24/bobby-jindal-indian-americans-opinions-contributors_immigrants_minority.html).

critical acclaim, only *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009 – present) still appeared on TV Guide's 'Best of' list, with the show's sole South Asian character Kalinda Sharma, played by Archie Panjabi, set to exit at the end of the current season. *Glee* (FOX, 2009 – 2015) no longer draws the audience and accolades that it did in its earlier seasons, and *Parks and Recreation's* (NBC, 2009 – 2015) enters its final season as a solid but comparatively unexciting sitcom. The absence of these shows as prominent fixtures in the media landscape has been keenly felt in terms of their contributions to Indian American representation. Nevertheless, one recent television show in particular, *The Mindy Project* (FOX, 2012 – present), has produced an Indian American character worthy of critical and academic attention. Yet, while the show certainly enhances Indian American visibility on primetime, a close reading of its textual politics reveals a more complex story.

In this chapter, I will argue that there are two progressive readings offered by *The Mindy Project*. One is a conventional reading of the visibility provided by Kaling's brown embodiment, however superficial, and the other is a critique of post-raciality. However, I show that these readings are problematised when the author's extradiegetic comments are taken into consideration. Although authorial intent has fallen out of favour in academia, by ignoring Mindy Kaling's chosen mode of representation of her public persona and her comments about her motivation and creative intent, I would be replicating traditional white hegemonic structures of ignoring minority voices and projecting an unearned unambiguous progressiveness on her texts. The paradox is that by seriously considering Kaling's role as an auteur, the radicality of her text is lessened.

### **Mindy Kaling and *The Mindy Project***

On September 25, 2012, *The Mindy Project* premiered on the FOX network. The show, written by and starring Mindy Kaling, a second generation Indian American, follows the exploits of Dr. Mindy Lahiri at the New York-based gynaecological practice of Schulman and Associates as she embarks upon the traditional quest of women on television to 'have it all'. Positioned somewhere between Lena Dunham's listless Hannah Horvath on HBO's *Girls* (2012 – present) and Tina Fey's semi-adjusted Liz Lemon on NBC's *30 Rock* (2006 – 2013), Mindy toes the line of real adulthood while still maintaining the fantastical pursuit of a life scripted by Nora Ephron.

In her position as the creator, writer, executive producer and director of the show, Kaling exerts extensive control over not only her character's celluloid image and agency but also her own representation as a woman of colour in the landscape of real America. Prior to *The Mindy Project's* debut, the last woman of colour to create and star in her own comedy series was Wanda Sykes in *Wanda At Large* (FOX, 2003 – 2003), a show that was cancelled after two seasons. In 1994, Margaret Cho helmed the short-lived *All-American Girl* (ABC, 1994 – 1995), which centred on a Korean American woman living with her traditional family. Cho has claimed that ABC producers insisted that she lose weight and act 'more Asian' to broaden her audience appeal, and when she resisted, the program was replaced with *The Drew Carey Show*.<sup>94</sup>

An appealing character typically means one whom the viewer finds recognizable and sympathetic. This means that a character's likeability is often a strong point of contention between showrunners and network executives. When audiences find are able to empathize with a character, they are more likely to keep watching.<sup>95</sup> On *The Mindy Project* however, Mindy's lack of concession to amiability sets her apart from most other women on network television. Though she is not modelled after the anti-hero archetype that has paved the way to commercial success for many male actors, Mindy's behaviour sets her apart from other female characters that bank on likeability to draw audiences. For example, unlike her most prominent peer on Fox's Tuesday night lineup, Zooey Deschanel's 'adorkable' Jess on *New Girl*, Mindy is not a well-meaning sweetheart. Instead, she is portrayed as an unabashed narcissist only interested in the well-being of others insofar as it pertains to her own happiness.

The pilot of *The Mindy Project* begins with Mindy having thoroughly embarrassed herself at her ex-boyfriend's wedding by giving a poorly thought out and even more poorly received speech, culminating in a drunken bicycle ride straight into a stranger's pool, in which a Barbie doll mocks her for not being able to keep a man.<sup>96</sup> After this humiliation, it is indicated that Mindy desires change for herself in order to get her career together and to find love. Yet when she is briefly inconvenienced, these plans turn into disposable suggestions. For example, she briefly contemplates "Eat Pray Love"-ing her

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<sup>94</sup> Mizejewski, Linda. *Pretty/funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*. University of Texas Press, 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Cohen, Jonathan. "Audience identification with media characters." *Psychology of entertainment* (2006): 183-197

<sup>96</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Pilot." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 25 September 2012. DVD

way to adulthood and self-fulfilment but immediately rejects her own proposition because she is uninterested in praying – that is, the portion that involves introspection.

It is this apparent lack of introspection and its ambiguous intentionality that drives critiques of *The Mindy Project*. Kaling's ability as a comedy writer is not in question as the show is routinely praised as funny, yet it is an uncomfortable truth that much of its humour often comes at the expense of thoughtful considerations of sensitive social issues, particularly those involving race. When asked about how her race affects her writing, Kaling said,

"There's a saying, I think, that I really believe in, sort of in terms of my Indian-ness, which is that I try not to rely on it nor deny it. You know, when it comes up organically in my writing, we can address it. And 'The Office,' about five years ago we wrote this episode called 'Diwali,' which seemed like an organic way of using it."<sup>97</sup>

Kaling's use of 'organic' and her subsequent interpretation of it through her writing are telling of the privileged position that she now occupies. She is reluctant to engage with what would seem to be critical issues for a woman of colour, claiming, "I don't really think of my work in political terms. I don't have that much time to do that."<sup>98</sup>

Taking her statement at face value, it would appear that Kaling's dismissiveness of her potential for cultural influence is reflected in a principally insubstantial body of work. However, I argue that her work on *The Mindy Project* can be seen as writing back against the model minority myth by presenting a version of Americanness that performs an exaggerated version of the neoliberal/post-racial subject. Rather than simply reading the absence of a racial community on the show as a rejection of racial discourse as a whole, I examine Mindy as the product of sharp awareness and purposeful ironic ignorance on Kaling's part in questioning the validity of tying performers to essentialised ideas of race.

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<sup>97</sup> Moraes, Lisa. "Mindy Kaling Talks New Rom-com for Fox, Indian Actors on TV."

*Washington Post*, 24 July 2012,

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/tv-column/post/mindy-kaling-talks-new-rom-com-for-fox-indian-actors-on-tv/2012/07/24/gJQAvBjr6W\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/tv-column/post/mindy-kaling-talks-new-rom-com-for-fox-indian-actors-on-tv/2012/07/24/gJQAvBjr6W_blog.html).

<sup>98</sup> Sepinwall, Alan. "Mindy Kaling on 'The Mindy Project,' 'The Office' and more." *UPROXX*, UPROXX, 4 Sept. 2012,

[www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/mindy-kaling-on-the-mindy-project-the-office-and-more](http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/mindy-kaling-on-the-mindy-project-the-office-and-more).



What complicates this reading however is that even though at the outset Kaling subverts traditionally white narratives of romance and career success by centering them on a brown female body, the subsequent positioning of other characters of colour, whether through visible portrayals or unseen punchlines, as 'incorrect' others undermines this subversiveness. In uncritically replicating structures of control, Kaling benefits individually as a showrunner at the expense of other people of colour who lack access to control of their representation.

### **Brown embodiment**

In an October 2014 *Morning Edition* interview with NPR's Rachel Martin, Kaling was asked how it felt to be "a woman who's been the first at something." She responded, "I know why people want me to speak about it. But I sort of refuse to be an outsider, even though I know that I very much look like one to a lot of people. And I refuse to view myself in such terms."<sup>99</sup> Kaling's reticence to address her position as a pioneer is tied to the implied expectations behind this seeming accolade – being the first also means being the only one and necessarily the best. In an interview at the Paley Center, she expressed her occasional frustration that her show is not set far in the future so she would not be tasked with representing all South Asians.<sup>100</sup>

Criticism of *The Mindy Project* may rightly focus on its lack of colour but it has also detrimentally overlooked what the show is saying about the link between whiteness and the shaping of American selfhood. *Girls* has been commended as ushering in a new era of authorship and agency, yet the attention to Kaling contains much less fervour. This is perhaps because, as indicated by its title, *Girls* makes a bold appeal to universality, opening itself up to criticism by those whose alternate experiences of girlhood have been disappeared. It is a show that attempts to capture a particular essence of womanhood (Lena Dunham's Hannah Horvath guilelessly calls herself 'a voice of a generation') even as it definitively excludes many women. In comparison, Kaling's show sets itself up from

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<sup>99</sup> Staff, NPR. "Mindy Kaling On Refusing To Be An Outsider And Sexism On Set." *NPR*, NPR, 16 Oct. 2014, [www.npr.org/2014/10/16/356390794/comedian-mindy-kaling-on-refusing-to-be-an-outsider-and-sexism-on-set](http://www.npr.org/2014/10/16/356390794/comedian-mindy-kaling-on-refusing-to-be-an-outsider-and-sexism-on-set).

<sup>100</sup> Mukhopadhyay, Samhita. "Why Mindy Kaling Refuses to Talk about Race—and Why I Care So Much." 6 Feb. 2015, <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/theslice/why-mindy-kaling-refuses-to-talk-about-race-and-why-i-care-so-much>.

the very beginning as extremely individualised narrative, decisively focusing on one woman and her ongoing self-creation.

In criticizing the show's lack of diversity, Al-Jazeera's E. Alex Chung points out,

Kaling has chosen to express herself through the lens of romantic comedies from the 1990s. You know, Meg Ryan movies. It's a genre we've come to associate with upwardly mobile white Americans whose aspirations are to find love; its women tend to find belonging by marrying the right man. At first, "*The Mindy Project*" appeared as though it would be a clever reworking of the genre, but after three and a half seasons, it's clear that Kaling isn't interested in subversion. She has reproduced the same story of romance that has already been told countless times — and just made herself the star.<sup>101</sup>

Yet it cannot be denied that positioning a brown body at the centre of romantic action and attention is an act of subversion in a culture that often wrests the sexuality of brown women from their own control. The show is a radical undertaking in that the conventions of romantic comedies are adapted to a single-camera format featuring a curvy South Asian protagonist, bucking the trend of underlying whiteness in post-feminist romantic comedy fantasies. What Kaling is attempting to do is not derivative but rather can be construed as radical through the active way she inserts herself – and by extension women of colour audiences – into romantic narratives that have previously centred on a white female lead.

Mindy exists in response to the demand for an agencied brown subject who is capable of constant self-invention. She is the intended product of contemporary forms of education and training and can cope without strong community roots or ties. She is a figure of the desire to make subjects responsible for their own lives through networks of 'social capital', forming an image of the ideal new feminine subject, a figure which resonates socially and culturally within a climate of compulsory success for people of colour. *The Mindy Project* participates in the reshaping of modern minority by the spreading of processes of individualization to ever-expanding areas of social, work, and

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<sup>101</sup> Jung, E. Alex. "OPINION: Mindy Kaling is not your pioneer." 11 Jan. 2015. *Al Jazeera America*, [america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/1/mindy-project-racetv.html](http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/1/mindy-project-racetv.html).

personal life, processes which involve an increasing tendency to self-monitoring, so that “we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves.”<sup>102</sup>

Viewed through this lens, Kaling appears to reject the hegemonic culturalist frame which not only essentialises individuals as belonging to cultural groups. As George Yúdice notes, identities are performative and serve a particular function for the “state institutions and media and market projections that shape, respectively, clients and consumers” that require these identities to be performed.<sup>103</sup> Kaling’s work problematises the use of culture and identity as frames for struggle, underscoring the new norm of the flourishing ‘self’. Rejecting the prescriptiveness inherent in being a ‘good race subject’, Kaling uses her writing to highlight the intense contestation between the competing rationalities of rights and participation as well as the hedonistic and caring dimensions of everyday consumer practice.

As Kaling deconstructs certain racial expectations, the tension between the subversion inherent in her brown embodiment and her intentional or otherwise replication of patterns of white hegemonic structures remains unaddressed. In a widely reported moment which occurred at the 2014 SXSW panel, Kaling was asked by a woman of colour in the audience about the lack of diversity on the show. Kaling responded,

“I’m a [expletive] Indian woman who has her own [expletive] network television show, okay?...No one asks any of the shows I adore...why no leads on their shows are women of colour, and I’m the one that gets lobbied about these things.”<sup>104</sup>

Kaling’s apparent frustration at the level of criticism levelled at her show is valid, so far as it is related to white critics who call out *The Mindy Project* for diversity issues without addressing the many white-dominated shows as well. However, when this criticism is levelled by other women of colour, Kaling’s desire to move ‘beyond race’ only encourages the idea that the world is wholly post-racial and delegitimises the genuine concerns of these already marginalised women.

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<sup>102</sup> Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press, 1991.

<sup>103</sup> Yúdice, George. *The expediency of culture: Uses of culture in the global era*. Duke University Press, 2003.

<sup>104</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0y\\_WDV\\_keCs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0y_WDV_keCs)

Kaling's defensive taciturnity in response to her critics is meaningful because as a woman of colour in control of her image, she is in the position to write back against harmful narratives that have been constructed around minorities. Kaling however seems to be unconcerned with the deracialisation she undergoes and in fact seems to encourage it. In one of her earliest Instagram posts at the show's start, she posted a photo in which she was surrounded by young white men in suits, with just one other woman part of the group. For some, this showed Kaling's apparent lack of concern in hiring minorities to write for her show. "That's quite a sausage fest," reads one of the comments on the photo, while another user asks, "Mindz, where's all them female writers at?"<sup>105</sup>

While Kaling did not address these comments directly, speaking to *Vulture*, she says, "I never want to be called the funniest Indian female comedian that exists. I feel like I can go head-to-head with the best white, male comedy writers that are out there. Why would I want to self-categorize myself into a smaller group than I'm able to compete in?"<sup>106</sup> Kaling's muddling of self-identification and self-exclusion is reflected in the racial makeup of her show, in which the fictional practice's only female doctor goes head-to-head with her white male colleagues without ever needing to confront issues of race and gender because her competence and value is assumed to be self-evident.

Kaling's complex desire to rid herself of a public fixation on presumed racial solidarity and uplift is mirrored on the show. Mindy is presented as someone primarily concerned with her own success, being the type of doctor who chastises her assistant for sending her patients in 'burkas' and instead requests that she be sent insured patients. When asked if she means "more white people," Mindy is quick to prevent that sentiment from being noted down in writing before mouthing, "Yes, more white people."<sup>107</sup> She is aware of her political incorrectness but has no real issue with benefiting from her own biases. In another episode 'Thanksgiving', Mindy runs into her ex-boyfriend who is now dating another Indian woman.<sup>108</sup> This woman has a similar education background to Mindy, having also attended Princeton, though she is several years Mindy's junior. When

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<sup>105</sup> Kaling, Mindy (mindykaling). "Our writing staff, premiere night. Thanks Ava for the pic!" Sept. 2012. Instagram. 8 Feb 2015. <http://instagram.com/p/QB9ibbJQ9e/?modal=true>

<sup>106</sup> Yuan, Jada. "The New New Girl: Mindy Kaling Promotes Herself Out of The Office and Into *The Mindy Project*." *Vulture*, 9 Sept. 2012, <http://www.vulture.com/2012/09/mindy-kaling-mindy-project.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Pilot." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 25 September 2012. DVD

<sup>108</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Thanksgiving." *The Mindy Project*. NBC: 20 November 2012. DVD

she tries to express 'brown girl solidarity', Mindy dismisses her, viewing her solely as a romantic rival and establishing her character as someone uninterested in forging connections on the basis of shared racial or gendered experiences, establishing the character's pattern of eschewing community for individualism.

### ***The Mindy Project's neoliberal subject***

*The Mindy Project's* particularised experience is devoid of the recognizable sense of community encouraged by identity politics. Rather, she seeks identity through conspicuous acts of consumption and various body projects in an attempt to become an entrepreneur of the self. Recognizing this, it becomes possible to uncover a reading of the show as a critique of the idealised neoliberal consumer citizen. Mindy's unabashed narcissism and focused self-interest places her existence with a "new habitat of subjectification", one characterised by "the belief that individuals can shape an autonomous identity for themselves through choices in taste, music, goods, styles and habits."<sup>109</sup> Mindy's ethics align with the neoliberalist approach of actively shaping an individual's life in relation to his or her own sense of fulfilment, rather than by reference to citizenship models formed through obligation and prescription in the creation of the subject.

While a representation that seems to encourage ahistorical approaches to issues of race and identity and align with neoliberal logic can be critiqued, it is also possible to read the character's resistance of community as subversive. Kaling's denial of her position as a model minority has led to the creation of a character that embodies an exaggerated post-racial subject who rejects the demands of good citizenship placed upon her by the racialization process. Kaling circumscribes the claims of her raced citizenship and chooses to reinscribe her rights as an American through the role of the consumer-citizen. In other words, her refusal to act as the raced subject, one who is supposed to form community, can be seen as a rejection not of that community as such, but of the white logic that has come to expect raced subjects to behave in certain collective ways.

If this is a fair reading, it is one that would need to extend beyond the confines of her television show. Kaling's social media presence appears to be intentionally curated

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<sup>109</sup> Rose, Nikolas. *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge university press, 1999 (p. 178)

to simultaneously maximize her relatability while also highlighting the unique circumstances of her career and accomplishments, a combination that allows her to straddle the line of visibility and invisibility. Kaling's Twitter feed largely comprises jokes and observational humour. In comparison, her showrunner peers like Shonda Rhimes and Lena Dunham have used their accounts as platforms to respond to criticism both professional and personal. Kaling's apparent silence on matters of concern to her viewers could stem from the fact that she is not as much a target of 'callout culture' as is someone like Dunham. For example, critics acknowledge that both *Girls* and *The Mindy Project* suffer from a lack of critical thinking about race. However, a Twitter search for "Mindy Kaling + black" on Twitter shows only one 'Top Tweet' calling out Kaling as antiblack, while a similar search for Dunham brings up numerous examples of people angered by what they perceive as her dismissal of diversity. A search for "Mindy Kaling + white" brings up a number of tweets in which fans of the comedienne identify themselves as 'the white Mindy Kaling', suggesting that they find her relatability is universal until the barrier of her skin is reached.

Kaling's Instagram feed is one of conspicuous consumption, showcasing the material gains of her success. This is a rare opportunity for women of Asian descent from whom meekness and humility have historically been demanded. Kaling is not boastful about her accomplishments but she is well aware of the luxuries to which she is privy in the world of fashion and celebrity, and has no qualms about sharing it with her millions of followers. Most of her Instagram posts are of herself in glamorous outfits, confronting her followers with both her brown body and her lavish designer wardrobe, a privilege often denied to women of colour, both on television and off. Kaling appears to be successfully negotiating her way through a society in which, due to rising levels of unsustainable consumption maintained by a culture of consumerism, people's identities are thoroughly invested in and carefully policed through their status as good consumers.

Similarly, Mindy's personal trajectory on the show follows this narrative. As Subramanian notes, "Mindy is constructed as the ideal American consumer-citizen; her love interests have all been white males, fashion is extremely important to her, and she is an unabashed proponent of the romantic and consumer fantasies that American

romantic comedies offer.”<sup>110</sup> Mindy’s outlandishly superficial behaviour and disregard for anything beyond self-fulfilment can also be seen as commentary on current patterns of commodity consumption that reproduce global inequality. Kaling’s embrace of her own position as consumer-citizen has encouraged a deracialisation of her brown body which becomes subsumed by markers of whiteness/success. Self-knowledge and self-love are key to individual advancement, but the injunction to be oneself and love oneself exist paradoxically within a discourse that imposes a specific order on legitimate desire. Kaling’s open surety of her capability and talent remain a source of discomfort for those unused to seeing brown women revel in their own achievements.<sup>111</sup>

Kaling is complicating the understanding of the model minority myth by positioning a brown embodiment of the neoliberal subject. The model minority, here, is complicit with neoliberal structures characterised by an individualism that seems to erase the necessity for any community solidarity between minorities. In this way, the minority is model because it can transcend its minority status and take on the white burden of neoliberal subjectivity. However, in critiquing the white hegemonic structure through a post-racial stance that does not demand responsibility, Kaling often reifies the very barriers her textual productivity seeks to break. In presenting an exacerbated version of post-racial figure, Kaling offers a critique of post-raciality by couching it in the narcissism and self-interest of a monstrous neoliberal subject.

While Kaling’s subversion of certain minority tropes is significant, her seeming pandering to whiteness has disappointed those who would see her as a leader paving the way for others. Yet expecting her to be trailblazer of representation by virtue of her embodiment as an Indian American woman is an outright conflation of her identity with her work. It props up the tokenism that plagues conversations about diversity by suggesting that representation is simply a matter of existing on television. *The Mindy Project* might be notable for starring a dark-skinned, chubby Indian woman as its lead, but in furthering the representation of people of colour in the media, the show has yet to offer substantial support to improving the optics of diversity.

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<sup>110</sup> Kaklamanidou, Betty, and Margaret Tally, eds. *The Millennials on Film and Television: Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*. McFarland, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Juzwiak, Rich. “Mindy Kaling Is the Human Equivalent of a Retweeted Compliment.” *Gawker*, [gawker.com/5943404/mindy-kaling-is-the-human-equivalent-of-a-retweeted-compliment](http://gawker.com/5943404/mindy-kaling-is-the-human-equivalent-of-a-retweeted-compliment).

## Race relations

For the first three seasons of *The Mindy Project*, there were no notable guest stars of colour, other than Utkarsh Ambudkar who played Mindy's brother, a role that by definition had to go to an actor of South Asian descent. The guest stars that have appeared have almost exclusively been white and male, mostly playing men that Mindy is interested in dating.

The role of Mindy's boyfriend is a colourblind role with no reason for them to have to be white, yet not one has been a person of colour. In the show's run so far, Mindy has dated 19 white men — "From the tall and white to the short and white, I've sampled an eclectic range of men," she proclaims.<sup>112</sup> In an *Entertainment Weekly* from August 2013, she asked, "Do people really wonder on other shows if female leads are dating multicultural people? Like I owe it to every race and minority and beleaguered person. I have to become the United Nations of shows?"<sup>113</sup> The recurrence of solely white love interests perpetuates the great lie of romance, which suggests that the pursuit of love is, paradoxically, both completely uninformed by class, race and gender conventions, as well as holds the ultimate promise of assimilation.

Mindy's personal preference is valid, yet it does not lie beyond the reach of questioning. Having Mindy exclusively date white men is a choice Kaling has made, and within that choice lies another glaring omission – there is never any confrontation of race within these relationships beyond the occasional fetishizing comment. It is naive to suggest that none of her white boyfriends has ever said that he has, for example, expressed a 'complimentary' proclivity for Asian women, or clumsily attempted to prove his familiarity with Indian culture. By cloaking Mindy's choice to date white men as incidental rather than intentional, Kaling perpetuates the idea that race, especially in the context of interracial dating, is only an issue because people of colour choose to make it one.

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<sup>112</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "An Officer and A Gynecologist." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 22 April 2014. DVD

<sup>113</sup> Shaw, Jessica. "Why Does 'Mindy' Only Date White Guys? Kaling Sounds Off!" *Entertainment Weekly's EW.com*, 1 Aug. 2013, <http://www.ew.com/article/2013/08/01/mindy-project-white-guys>.



Mary Beltran and Camille Fojas have delineated women of colour in interracial pairings function as post-racial signifiers.<sup>114</sup> This positioning relocates the responsibility and causality of systemic inequity onto the body, once again centering the individual's choices as the ultimate solution beyond the constraints of political and social policy. People of colour who blend with white partners are given the chance to immerse themselves in the dominant community, acting as a model minority bridge that allowing race to be treated as a non-issue. Still, Mindy's interracial relationship is deserves recognition as being noteworthy on television where Indian women are rarely seen as having sexual agency. She rejects the onus placed on women of colour who must either prove or disprove their race loyalty to have romantic or professional value.

*The Mindy Project* is part of the media's projection of an idealised multicultural nation and while Kaling's primary drive might be to mine humour, as an accessible public text her show also functions to prescribe how race should be understood, performed and communicated within the context of building an American identity. Kaling's post-raciality is a prescription devoid of the anti-racist action critical race scholars have identified as necessary in a true post-racial world. There is no indication of the role of the citizenry or the government in the active creation of a post-racial future. Rather, it treats the present as bearing witness to the gradual passive (self-)destruction of race as an anachronistic social category.<sup>115</sup>

The media play major roles in drawing lines between identity groups and between acceptable ways of 'doing' race, and dominant post-racial narratives do not necessarily represent the interests of people of colour. *The Mindy Project's* reticence at addressing race implicitly frames it as a destructive and divisive mode of categorization, while positioning a nebulous American identity as a source of solidarity, echoing the post-racial call for individuals to invest in more legitimate group identities to organize civic interests. The show simplifies categories of identity as singular, constructing an either/or dichotomy based on an essentialised view of race 'done' through market consumption and interpersonal relations. For example, Mindy does not express any ambivalence about

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<sup>114</sup> Beltrán, Mary C., and Camilla Fojas, eds. *Mixed Race Hollywood*. NYU Press, 2008.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Asen suggests thinking of citizenship as comprising "mode[s] of public engagement" which can help scholars focus on ways in which citizens engage each other and institutions, and produce communications. Asen, Robert. "A discourse theory of citizenship." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90.2 (2004): 189-211.

being the sole Indian woman working in an environment shaped by the expectations of a white male establishment. The treatment of race as ornamental on *The Mindy Project* perpetuates a hegemonic structure of whiteness by disguising how the projection of racial fantasies operates on an interpersonal level.

When race does intentionally enter the frame, it is treated as an imposition. In a recent episode, 'Stanford,'<sup>116</sup> Mindy meets another Indian doctor, Neepa, at a fellowship program who greets her in an Indian language, which Danny mistakes for Spanish, responding, "Hola, como esta?" Mindy replies, "I actually don't speak any Indian languages, but I do know how to do a kind of offensive Indian accent."

Neepa: My husband is back in India, working in a chemical plant until I finish this fellowship and we can be a family again.

Mindy: [grasping Danny's face] This handsome one right here, he doesn't live here either. New York City. But he's going to visit a lot, 'cause he's got a ton of miles, 'cause he's constantly complaining to the airline.

Danny: Yeah I don't like when they change the gate on me, you know, I'm all set up at 42B then they reroute me to 41? I mean, it'll cost you!

Neepa: [uncomfortably] We're in the same boat.

This exchange exemplifies the lack of awareness with which Mindy lives her life of privilege, encouraged and exacerbated by the privilege of those around her. It does not bother her that the only point of commonality she is able to muster with another Indian woman doctor is the ability to mock her accent, long a means of ostracization faced by Indian Americans. In the same episode, another doctor assumes that she is Latina, which Mindy simply ignores.

Kaling is likely to have experienced such misidentification in her own life, not least an incident at a New Yorker after-party where a drunk man mistook her for Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai. Not only did Kaling predictably laugh it off, saying, "That's the

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<sup>116</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Stanford." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 6 January 2015. DVD

best thing that's happened all night,"<sup>117</sup> she also included the run-in in a scene in a recent episode where one of the practice's nurses makes the same mistake.<sup>118</sup> Another instance of misrecognition occurs in 'Annette Castellano is My Nemesis' when Mindy first meets the mother of her boyfriend Danny (Dr. Danny Castellano, another doctor at Schulman and Associates, played by Chris Messina), she is mistaken for a service worker. When Mindy realises what has happened, she berates Danny: "Why didn't you tell your mother that I wasn't the cleaning lady? Do I look Dominican to you? Do not answer that."<sup>119</sup> Almost any exchange that Mindy has about race appears meant to prove that she is not one of the others but a full-blooded American. As she says to Neepa, she is from "Boston, baby, home of the Freedom Trail and Tom Brady's penis."<sup>120</sup>

Kaling seizes on the palatability of narrating nationhood through humour and is well aware that nonpoliticised content increases economic viability. The trade-off for this all-American appeal is that Mindy's immigrant parents have no presence on the show, beyond a brief glimpse of her mother in a sari in the show's pilot. Her brother Rishi has appeared in a couple of episodes, offering his brief presence to establish that she has a family before disappearing. A joke in a later episode has Mindy forgetting that she has a brother, only to be reminded by her Danny that he exists. This conspicuous absence makes the show feel curiously ahistorical, especially since in the episode 'Dinner at the Castellanos', Mindy makes references to a hands-on parenting approach throughout her childhood:

When I was 11, I hated that boys would tease me because I would read all the time, and my parents wouldn't let me wear makeup. I was embarrassed, and I wanted to move to Lake Buena Vista and audition for The All-New Mickey Mouse Club. And my mom wasn't like, 'Sure Mindy, go ahead and do that!' She hit me with an encyclopaedia, and now I'm perfect.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Bernstein, Jacob. "Mindy Kaling Hasn't Won a Nobel Prize. Yet." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 25 Oct. 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/fashion/mindy-kaling-talks-at-the-new-yorker-festival.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/fashion/mindy-kaling-talks-at-the-new-yorker-festival.html).hit

<sup>118</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "No More Mr. Noishe Guy." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 3 February 2015. DVD

<sup>119</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Annette Castellano Is My Nemesis." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 23 September 2014. DVD

<sup>120</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Stanford." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 6 January 2015. DVD

<sup>121</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Dinner At The Castellanos." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 10 February 2015. DVD

Yet in her day-to-day life, she appears to be a woman without any family. Hers is the imagined community of lovelorn career women whose identities are defined primarily by the purchasing power they wield and their access to the institutions of marriage and motherhood.

### **The 'good' other**

In 2014, Kaling was nominated for an NAACP Image Award.<sup>122</sup> The nominations are considered from an African American perspective, which does not require nominees to be black or people of colour – past nominees have included Emma Stone and Justin Timberlake. Nominees are expected to have done something to contribute to the representation and general well-being of people of colour, especially African Americans, in the media. Taking this into consideration, Kaling's nomination provokes a mixed reaction. The show's acknowledgment of race has largely been limited to poking fun at its overwhelming whiteness, showing an awareness of the criticism that exists. However, this is far from the same as addressing the criticism.

Beyond simply revelling in whiteness, *The Mindy Project* actively uses blackness not only as a punchline but as a way to distinguish between acceptable minority behaviours. In the episode 'An Officer and a Gynaecologist', while arguing with a patient's father that birth control does not promote sexual behaviour, Mindy says, "You know what encourages sex? Alcohol, hotness, black music."<sup>123</sup> That Kaling is given leeway with a line like that which would inspire vitriol had it come from someone like Lena Dunham is partially because the show has received less attention from cultural critics as an outright sitcom – compared to Dunham's more critically appealing tragicomic take – but it is also because Kaling herself is aware that she is given a pass due to her embodiment. In an interview with Charlie Rose, she says:

"[I]f I was being played by, frankly, a thin, beautiful, blond woman, you might find it incredibly insufferable. But I have the trappings of a marginalised person and

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<sup>122</sup> Chitnis, Deepak. "Mindy Kaling, Archie Panjabi, Karan Brar, Chitra Sampath nominated for NAACP's Image Awards." *The American Bazaar*, The American Bazaar, 14 Feb. 2014, [www.americanbazaaronline.com/2014/02/07/mindy-kaling-archie-panjabi-karan-brar-chitra-sampath-nominated-naacps-image-awards](http://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2014/02/07/mindy-kaling-archie-panjabi-karan-brar-chitra-sampath-nominated-naacps-image-awards).

<sup>123</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "An Officer and A Gynecologist." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 22 April 2014. DVD

when that person is like decisively saying sort of conservative things and all over the map things.”<sup>124</sup>

Some of the most offensive lines in the show veer towards conservative extremes – Mindy likes guns and has read Sarah Palin’s memoir, wants to “get” the terrorists, and thinks recycling makes people look poor. These are written with the explicit knowledge that a woman of colour saying them makes it acceptable. In light of Kaling’s claim that she is “weirdly patriotic,”<sup>125</sup> her denial of the social strata that exists between women of colour in America – not dissimilar to the gulf between a marginalised person and a thin, beautiful, blond woman – is troubling, not least because it lends credence to the idea that racialised humour is legitimised coming from a person of colour.

Mindy is guided by the notion of privilege, typical for a post-racial and post-feminist heroine. Her white collar occupation and comfortable lifestyle are in line with her position as model minority associated with success within the American racial paradigm. Yet this privilege inevitably mitigates her brown-ness to construct her as “the right kind of subject who can make the right choices.”<sup>126</sup>

The model minority myth provides the cultural script for this behaviour. If the initial expectation was that South Asians behave as humble immigrants who kept their heads down and did not mingle too much outside their own race, Kaling’s millennial approach views complete assimilation as the goal. There may not be an incentive for Kaling bring up race directly in her writing but her silence and targeted humour tacitly acknowledges that there is a social reward for not being like “other” people of colour. The pressure to reconcile a hyphenated identity is a real struggle for South Asians especially in post-9/11 America where the South Asian community has consistently been interrogated to ensure they are not a threat. Kaling contributes to a narrative about how there are good South Asians and bad South Asians, and Kaling/Mindy makes it clear she belongs firmly in the former group.

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<sup>124</sup> “Charlie Rose: Mindy Kaling; John Feinstein; Impossible.com.” CharlieRose.com. 28 Mar 2014. Web. 23 Jan 2015.

<sup>125</sup> “Charlie Rose: Mindy Kaling; John Feinstein; Impossible.com.” CharlieRose.com. 28 Mar 2014. Web. 23 Jan 2015.

<sup>126</sup> McRobbie, Angela. “Post-feminism and popular culture.” *Feminist media studies* 4.3 (2004): 255-264.

In interviews, Kaling has alluded to the fact that women are limited in the ways they are allowed to discuss their choices:

As a producer and a writer, whether it was at *The Office* or [at *The Mindy Project*], if I make a decision, it'll still seem like it's up for debate. And I notice that a little bit at *The Office*, with, like, an actor: If I decided there'd be a certain way in the script, it would still seem open-ended, whereas...if I was a man I would not have seen that.<sup>127</sup>

Often, humility and continual self-recrimination must be included as justification for even the slightest deviation from the dictations of society. Through Mindy's assertiveness, Kaling demonstrates that the lexicon of flaws and struggles should not be the only language women are allowed to speak. On *The Mindy Project*, Kaling challenges this vocabulary of sufficiency through the way that Mindy's body is discussed on the show. As a woman of colour, Kaling undoubtedly has had to deal with hegemonic skin tone ideologies which dictate that lighter skin tone and Caucasian facial features considered more appealing and attractive are played up as beauty ideals that are consistently reproduced in the media.<sup>128</sup> This is evident in the examples of South Asian women in the media, particularly those created and cast by white media producers who favour women of colour who fulfil the terms of attractiveness based on their proximity to white physical characteristics. This replicates the hegemony that favours a specific type of physicality over others and bolsters social assumption that there is a particular 'type' of South Asian that can be deemed attractive.

Mindy shares the Tuesday night slot on FOX with another Indian character, Hannah Simone's Cece on *New Girl*. Comparing the two characters is an interesting exercise in exploring the physical characterization of Indian American women on television. Cece is a tall, slim, light-skinned woman, whereas Mindy is short, curvy, and has a dark complexion. Cece is a bartender studying for the GED and Mindy is a gynaecologist with an Ivy League fellowship. Cece's looks are commented on by others with great frequency, especially because she has had a career as a model, but she herself

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<sup>127</sup> NPR, 2014

<sup>128</sup> Jefferson, Deana L., and Jayne E. Stake. "APPEARANCE SELF-ATTITUDES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN AMERICAN WOMEN: MEDIA COMPARISONS AND INTERNALIZATION OF BEAUTY IDEALS." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 33.4 (2009): 396-409.; Childs, Erica Chito. *Fade to black and white: Interracial images in popular culture*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

rarely reflects on her looks. In comparison, almost every episode of *The Mindy Project* contains a reference to Mindy's appearance, either by herself or those around her. Kaling's awareness that she does not fit the American ideal of beauty is played out on screen through Mindy's insistence on her own all-American appeal – in the pilot, she drunkenly proclaims "I'm Sandra Bullock!"<sup>129</sup>

There is a chasm between how the world views Indian women and how Mindy views herself, and it is in this space that Kaling challenges audience expectations. In Mindy's world, proclaiming your solidarity with America's sweetheart and truly believing in your own desirability makes it true. Self-belief erases the complex structures of oppression, once again placing the value of self-improvement on the shoulders of the individual. However, Mindy's success at maintaining a positive body image in the face of discrimination – even if it is not referenced on the show – comes at the expense of others who are farther away from the beauty ideal. In the same episode, Kaling makes it clear as to how Mindy sees herself, "My Body Mass Index isn't great but I'm not like Precious or anything." She is not Precious (the overweight protagonist of Lee Daniels' 2009 film of the same name) in terms of both body weight and racial identity, pointing to the ways Kaling negotiates the opportunities and limitations of being a non-white performer on network television. Bringing up Precious as a poor, obese black protagonist raises the spectre of blackness and wildness within *The Mindy Project's* narrative and highlights Mindy's privilege to be able to navigate the spaces she is allowed to inhabit and to pursue her assimilation-promising love interests. Kaling often distances Mindy from blackness in ways that underline that she is not "too black" to be a viable romantic comedy heroine.

In the episode 'In the Club'<sup>130</sup>, Mindy gets excited when she finds out that NBA players will be at a club to which she and her colleagues are going because "it's a scientific fact that black guys love Indian girls." Her eventual love interest, Josh, turns out to be a white man who asks her "Are you the mistress of a black congressman?", posing the question as a compliment and reifying the specificity of her desirability. Mindy's comments reveal her assumptions of the perceptions of beauty held by black men, particularly those who might date outside of their race. She assumes that sharing the physical characteristics of black women without having to actually confront and

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<sup>129</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Pilot." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 25 September 2012. DVD

<sup>130</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "In The Club." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 9 October 2012. DVD

negotiate blackness herself makes her more appealing to black men. Her comments position a racial hierarchy in which she can align herself with the black community with just enough distance between to make the comment in the first place within her circle of white peers.

This functions to associate Mindy with black identity by proxy, positioning her safely away from blackness while benefiting from its credentials. When she first meets one of her love interests, Casey, he believes her to be a “rapper’s publicist.”<sup>131</sup> Casey, played by Anders Holm, is a minister who himself frequently uses African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in a way that is viewed as cute, comical, and stripped of the negative perceptions that the black community receives from using AAVE. Mindy’s brother Rishi also happens to be an aspiring rapper, a common phenomenon amongst second generation South Asians, where East Coast Indians adopt and experiment with hip-hop music and style.<sup>132</sup>

Kaling has said that she finds the racial tensions between different minority groups to be fertile joke-ground. Kaling’s brand of comedy centres herself in proximity to whiteness, following the pattern of other comedians from non-dominant categories who secure success if they cater to well-established and entrenched stereotypes about their subordinate identity categories. In this way, the genre of disenfranchising black bodies onscreen is perpetuated through Kaling’s work.

### **Racial confrontation**

For most of the show’s first season, Mindy’s most significant interaction with characters of colour remained her brief exchange at the club with professional athletes. That was before Roquemore actually appeared on the show, with an introduction that fulfilled the stereotype of a black woman in terms of accent, sassiness, and her initial portrayal as an incompetent nurse who sang out her one-liners in a display of innate black musicality.<sup>133</sup> Tamra’s ‘ghetto’ characterization is furthered through Ray-Ron, her uneducated deadbeat boyfriend, a troubling portrayal of class which the show tries to

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<sup>131</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "My Cool Christian Boyfriend." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 2 April 2013. DVD

<sup>132</sup> Maira, Sunaina. "Henna and hip-hop: The politics of cultural production and the work of cultural studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3.3 (2000): 329-369.

<sup>133</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Triathlon." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 30 April 2013. DVD



pass off through the fact that Ray-Ron is white. This portrayal of the show's sole black character is not a complex one and positions her mainly as the punch line.

To critics of Kaling's racial politics, Tamra appears to have been written for two purposes: firstly, as a black caricature and secondly, as a force to bring Kaling's character closer to whiteness. Mindy's personal struggles are softened by making constant jabs at Tamra, creating a dichotomy where Mindy props herself up closer to whiteness by furthering herself from Tamra's stereotypical 'ghetto humour'. When Tamra is portrayed as rational and informed it is done for shock value because it seems that only the model minority and her white peers are expected to perform intellectualism.

In 'Mindy Lahiri Is A Racist,'<sup>134</sup> the plot is driven by an accusation made by Tamra that Mindy is guilty of racism in the workplace. At the episode's climax, she informs a crowd gathered outside the practice that Mindy has banned her from the office bathroom and must instead use the one at a nearby copy shop. She also claims that Mindy suggested that she should be with someone 'more like her' than her (white) boyfriend Ray-Ron. However, it is revealed to the audience that Tamra has intentionally misrepresented Mindy's actions: Tamra was banned from the bathroom because she shaves her legs in the bathroom and as a result, Mindy slipped on a puddle and injured herself. Mindy's suggestion that she leave Ray-Ron was due to the fact that, upon meeting him, he behaved poorly and inconsiderately, and she believes that he does not treat Tamra as well as she deserves.

The other plotline in the episode involves Danny's accidental endorsement by a 'white power Mommy blog.' These story lines converge when at a rally for a black political candidate championed by the practice's rivals, the midwives – who do not speak of the candidate's politics beyond noting that they "think it's cool that he's black, very cool" – the whole practice is accused of racist misconduct, which is a ploy in order to draw away their clients. The practice hires a publicist named Priscilla, played by Jenna Elfman, to help them with their public image. Upon their first meeting with her, the following exchange occurs:

Mindy: I am Indian. I can't be racist.

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<sup>134</sup> Kaling, Mindy, prod. "Mindy Lahiri Is A Racist." *The Mindy Project*. FOX: 19 November 2013. DVD

Danny: Oh please, you only hook up with white guys. I've hooked up with every race of woman.

Mindy: How dare you. I went to second base with my friend Korean Justin. His hands were so small it made my boobs feel enormous.

Priscilla: Everything you just said was racist.

The midwives showy racial progressiveness is mocked in the same way that their New Age approach to healing is. When one of them says, "The midwives believe all ethnicities should procreate until we have one gorgeous caramel coloured race," Mindy quickly retorts, "Is that from your seventh grade diary? You had that epiphany?"

When Tamra tells the crowd that Mindy called Ray-Ron a deadbeat, she responds, "It's okay to call a white person a deadbeat. Or uppity. Or lazy." As damage control, Peter offers to talk to the candidate, Whitfield, whom he claims to know from Dartmouth. However, upon approaching him, Peter quickly backtracks, "That is not my friend," indicating that he has mistaken one black man for another. He explains, "In my defence, I was drunk every time I hung out with the guy I thought that was." In order to save the practice, Mindy apologises to Tamra despite not believing that she has done anything wrong. Hearing the apology, Tamra states that she knows Mindy is not racist, whereby Mindy interjects to admit that she is anti-Semitic but she is "probably going to marry one." Tamra claims that it is Mindy's condescension that bothers her. After apologizing to Tamra, Mindy addresses the crowd, "My name is Mindy Lahiri and I am not a racist. Sure I tell edgy jokes sometimes but people really like that."

When Whitfield accepts Mindy's apology, the midwives, who are white males, argue, "This is not an olive branch. This is a master's whip they're handing you!" which draws vocal disapproval from the crowd. Whitfield tells them off. "You're kind of wasting my time. These people are barely racist." The resolution of this episode is significant because it dismisses Mindy's proclivity towards racial insensitivity as a personal quirk. She is offered absolution from the accusations of racism by the people seemingly in the best position to offer it: black men and women. In Mindy's world, racism 'barely' exists and when it does, it is not the result of systemic injustices but the personal choices of the people involved in specific situations.

In the case of an episode like this where race is clearly foregrounded, the show purposefully addresses the topic as a problem between individuals and not reflective of any larger issues of concern. The lesson Mindy learns is not one of racial sensitivity but of friendship, even though her condescension towards Tamra is based on her expectations of black and lower class people. Kaling does not necessarily have to be held to different standards than her white peers but given her ornamentalisation of race in this instance (as just one example), her refusal to probingly confront the show's racial issues is problematic. Blatant racism may not be as easily identified as it used to be, but to deny that cultural distinctions exist as Kaling does is dishonest. The heightened self-reflexivity of a 'post' world as evidenced by both Mindy and Kaling's self-monitoring – through the show's voiceover and through interviews and social media – does not extend to an awareness of race. The show simply uses race to inform individualistic narratives of self-discovery and embraces depoliticised celebrations of blurred boundaries. This assimilationist construction of *The Mindy Project* is well-positioned to work in a colourblind television landscape where race is used as window dressing to demonstrate diversity and how multi-cultural prime-time television has become.

### **Mindy Kaling's post-racial (in)visibility**

Kaling's solitary position as a woman of colour behind the scenes has been matched on *The Mindy Project* for most of the show's run. Now in its third season, Mindy remains only doctor of colour in the office as well as the only female character with any significant storyline. Yet the audience is given very little sense of what it feels like to live through that racial and gendered difference daily, a situation enlightened by Kaling's position that "it's insidious to be spending more of your time reflecting and talking about panels, and talking more and more in smart ways about your otherness, rather than doing the hard work of your job."<sup>135</sup>

As Kaling stated in a September 2013 feature for Parade magazine:

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<sup>135</sup> Kutner, Jenny. "Mindy Kaling Is Busy — so Stop Asking Her to Comment on Her "otherness"." *Salon*, 26 Oct. 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2014/10/16/mindy\\_kaling\\_is\\_busy\\_so\\_stop\\_asking\\_her\\_to\\_comment\\_on\\_her\\_otherness/](http://www.salon.com/2014/10/16/mindy_kaling_is_busy_so_stop_asking_her_to_comment_on_her_otherness/).

I always get asked, "Where do you get your confidence?" I think people are well meaning, but it's pretty insulting. Because what it means to me is, "You, Mindy Kaling, have all the trappings of a very marginalised person. You're not skinny, you're not white, you're a woman. Why on earth would you feel like you're worth anything?...While I'm talking about why I'm so different, white male show runners get to talk about their art."<sup>136</sup>

Paradoxically, Kaling's invisibility as a South Asian woman makes her one of the most visible Asian Americans in popular culture today. A recent Super Bowl ad featuring Kaling illustrates how her race allows her to be influential and indistinct all at once. Kaling capitalises on her visibility as a celebrity to comment on the invisibility as an Indian woman. The ad begins with Kaling attempting to hail a taxi and being ignored – a common experience for minorities – leading her to consider that she might actually be invisible. She stretches naked in the park, steals food from a stranger's plate, walks through a car wash, and eats from a tub of ice cream in the middle of a grocery store. It is only when she attempts to accost Matt Damon with a kiss that she realises she can, in fact, be seen. In a voiceover, Julia Roberts says, "Mindy was actually not invisible. She had just always been treated that way."<sup>137</sup> It is an ad for Nationwide insurance – an industry that has a fraught relationship with minorities and those outside the upper class – imploring the viewer to "Join the Nation that sees you." This ad capitalises on Kaling's distinctive position as a famous woman of colour. She is once again surrounded by whiteness that subsumes her brown identity until it reveals its function within a capitalist mechanism. Kaling's duelling conceptions of what it is to be Indian-American – the triumphant and the defensive – sit together uncomfortably on screen and in the crafting of her public persona.

Kaling's embrace of a post-racial (and seemingly post-racism) world reads as an attempt to get 'beyond race' by rejecting terms that are tied to essentialist understandings of identity. While her use of comedy undoubtedly has the potential to undermine racism, post-racial humour is not automatically anti-racist. It does not

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<sup>136</sup> Malcom, Shawna. "Thoroughly Modern Mindy Kaling." *Parade*, 28 Sept. 2013, <http://parade.com/167806/shawnamalcom/thoroughly-modern-mindy-kalings-house-rules/>.

<sup>137</sup> Rogers, Christopher. "Mindy Kaling Tries Kissing Matt Damon In Super Bowl Ad – Watch." *Hollywood Life*, 1 Feb. 2015, <http://hollywoodlife.com/2015/02/01/mindy-kaling-super-bowl-commercial-2015-nationwide-insurance-superbowl-ad/>.

necessarily require placing responsibility on or indicting those who may deserve it. Post-racial humour that is not actively anti-racist does not seek accountability but is more likely used to level the playing field by claiming equality through ahistorical erasure.

To only read *The Mindy Project* in the manner that those displeased with her lack of racial solidarity might do would be to give in to ideological dogmatism. Kaling's figure as the comedian and the producer who exerts such authorial control – a rarity for anyone in the creative industry, let alone a woman of colour – makes it impossible not to read *The Mindy Project* alongside Kaling's extratextual commentary. Kaling's post-racialism is tied to the form of post-feminism found in the media described by Mary Vavrus as a

depoliticizing ideology whose claims include that feminism is unnecessary now that women have ascended to high status...jobs and are protected from sex discrimination due to various laws...If women fail to succeed under these conditions, they have only themselves to blame.<sup>138</sup>

The overlap between post-racial and post-feminist discourses is characterised by the dismissal of intersectional complications - of power, race, class, and sexuality - that act to limit the choices of women, particular those in the working class and communities of colour.

By centering her within a white hegemonic world, Kaling writes Mindy as a character whose visibility has not prevented her from 'melting' into the American pot. Her legitimacy as an American citizen is reinforced by her overt and exaggerated position as a consumer-citizen. The transformative potential of her difference is glossed over. While Kaling has been criticised for this, her position is precarious. If the goal of television is broad appeal, how then can Kaling be asked to reinvent a pluralist model free from existing hierarchies of racial, gender and sexual orientation differences? Yet there is a distinction between being asked to revolutionize the media landscape and being asked simply not to exacerbate the existing problems within it. It is difficult to disentangle Kaling's intent in dismantling essentialist representations from her potentially harmful mimicry of successful tropes of white male comedic inclinations.

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<sup>138</sup> Vavrus, Mary Douglas. *Postfeminist news: Political women in media culture*. SUNY Press, 2002.

Recent scholarship within the field of television studies has identified the various complexities behind the role of the contemporary showrunner<sup>139</sup> but academic work on female showrunners is still greatly lacking. When attention is given to this revolutionary new wave of content creators, the focus has largely been on white women like Tina Fey and Lena Dunham. Kaling's position as an Indian woman in a significant position of power has strangely been ignored by scholars who appear to dismiss the show as following a predictable and unimaginative sitcom format, discounting the fact that the main character's brown embodiment marks a significant change in the media landscape and is worthy of academic discourse. Examining the way that Kaling and other creatives of colour choose to tell or not tell the stories of their racial past is necessary to understand the evolution of representational politics in American media. It is crucial to survey how individualistic approaches of content creators to post-raciality affect the narratives available to audiences. Representations authored by people of colour matter because they provide opportunities to counter racist assumptions but only if past articulations are challenged and problematised instead of simply replicated.

This chapter takes seriously Kaling's her extratextual comments because historically such women and their voices have been left out. Following this logic, of course, it is also important to take into account the audience's comments, which demonstrate the problematic nature of post-racial humour and show that viewers are invested in talking through different interpretations. Thomas Holt writes, "post signals ambiguity: different from what preceded it, but not yet fully formed or knowable."<sup>140</sup> Kaling's work complicates the ability to identify that tenuous break in the performance of ironic racism and sexism. Her work forces the viewer to question perceptions of a brown woman knowingly embracing repellent rhetoric, albeit with a wink. If that rhetoric furthers her own individual success at the expense of the communal good, is it doing anything different from the white hegemonic work that preceded it? Kaling may not be interested in tokenism or becoming a symbol, yet critics are not wrong to point out that she is profiting by distancing herself from her brownness blackness and creating her version of an 'acceptable' other. Seen more positively, she is also defying categorization and offering woman of colour in her audience an unapologetic way of being that does not

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<sup>139</sup> See Newman, Michael Z., and Elana Levine. *Legitimizing television: Media convergence and cultural status*. Routledge, 2012.

<sup>140</sup> Holt, Thomas C. *The problem of race in the twenty-first century*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

demand servility and humility. In this chapter, an examination of Kaling's work has shown that post-racial change must go beyond quantitative representation and demand more meaningful conversations about how and in what contexts these representations occur. It becomes critical to examine emerging methods of inclusion to see how people of colour are being used to signify racial enlightenment as visibility cannot be taken as unequivocally progressive. By disregarding the post-racial media landscape as simply unknowable, the corrosive, continuing effects of race are replicated in contemporary popular culture.

### Chapter Three: *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish*

In the foreword to Frantz Fanon's seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Homi Bhabha writes that Fanon's scholarship, though shaped by his particular experiences of European colonialism, transcends this historicised moment to offer conceptual tools for critiquing processes of racialization in other contexts.<sup>141</sup> The timelessness of Fanon's work is partly due to his concept of the "racial optic"<sup>142</sup> through which Fanon observes and deconstructs the conditions of colonization (and domination) and its repercussions. Fanon notes,

[I]t is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infra-structure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.<sup>143</sup>

Fanon's work thus provides a framework for theorizing the social inequalities that proliferate within the aspirations of a post-racial/race-blind 21<sup>st</sup> Century United States.

Fanon structures his arguments around the key notion that racism and racial inferiority are not simply effects of determinant economic policies but are instead organizing principles of society. While processes of racialization may manifest differently over time and space, the idea of this "organizing principle" can inform a more thorough understanding of national formations. Rather than being causally related, Fanon links class and race as gaining meaning from one another; neither predetermines the other but both are co-produced through dialectic, making any order simultaneously racial and economic in nature. This intersectional approach acknowledges that through processes of differentiation and delineation of spaces, race and class co-establish one another to form barriers between poor/people of colour and wealthy/white people.

The systems of power that Fanon critiqued which shaped colonial formations have reformulated within the blueprint of neoliberalism to reproduce the same inequities. Given the realities of American history, it becomes crucial to view the processes that occur within this structure with the "racial optic." While there are many ways of

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<sup>141</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press, 2007: p. xii.

<sup>142</sup> Fanon, 2007, p. xiii.

<sup>143</sup> Fanon, 2007, p. 5.



conceptualizing race, the simple inclusion of race is not in itself inherently liberating. In Fanon's work and in the larger field of critical race studies, race is treated not as a biological trait but, rather, a historically constructed phenomenon and culturally mediated artefact that illustrates how the (wealthy/white) colonizers/dominant group exist only through their relationship with the (poor/non-white) colonised/subordinate group.<sup>144</sup>

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man...his inferiority comes into being through the other.<sup>145</sup>

Wealth is can therefore only be built upon poverty, and whiteness may exist only through the social construction of blackness.

The poor material circumstances associated with the black body are not 'natural' consequences of an inherently inferior condition but has a "historico-racial schema"<sup>146</sup> that treats race as a historical accomplishment. In this schema, the "white man" has constructed a narrative of the inferiority of blackness through "a thousand details, anecdotes, stories."<sup>147</sup> This racialised hierarchy is then enforced through socio-cultural institutions and becomes materially and discursively linked.

Fanon argues that biological determinism acts as a premise for racial othering, writing that essentializing a race reveals a failure to understand how historical and economic realities have shaped the lives of black people.<sup>148</sup> Fanon's disavowal of a black 'essence' denies an automatic or inherent racial unity in both (white) oppressive and (non-white) oppositional actions<sup>149</sup> and rejects essentialist and universalist approaches as well as the scholastic predilection for producing uniform racial categories that do not intersect with other aspects of power.

Situating race culturally and historically makes the potential for liberation possible. The dominant group may attempt to naturalize race through violent imposition and culture, but Fanon's de-essentialism provides a demystified definition of race which

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<sup>144</sup> Fanon, 2007, p.2.

<sup>145</sup> Fanon, 2007, p. 110.

<sup>146</sup> Fanon, 2007, p. 111.

<sup>147</sup> Fanon, 2007, p. 111.

<sup>148</sup> Fanon, 2007, pp. 160-161.

<sup>149</sup> Fanon, 2007, p. 163.

rejects that the powerful and disempowered are fixed in their alienated states. For Fanon, the materialization of race in discrete forms does not prevent individuals from shifting between these polarised worlds. In referring to this mobility, he perceives a person as “white” only when racial hierarchy has been internalised. Fanon argues that disalienation from this hierarchy requires two-sided movement that demands conscious recognition from the dominant of the subordinate, closing his other key text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, with the statement, “I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness.”<sup>150</sup>

Fanon’s work provides the background to the third principle of critical race theory, differential racialization. This refers to the racialised lens by which the dominant group of a society construct and assigns particular expectations, behaviours, language, norms and meanings to minority groups – for example, black Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans – according to changing economic interests. Racializing a group devalues and dehumanises the group, saddling its members with the stereotypes of the most negative characteristics such as laziness, criminality, and sneakiness.<sup>151</sup> Racialization acts to cultivate an attitude in the majority that members of the racialised group do not deserve the same rights – such as voting, property, marriage, freedom – as white men because they are not white men. Often, the process of racialization pits multiple minority groups against each other for jobs to the benefit of whites who employ the laborers at low cost.

Racial constructions enforced by the dominant racial group and accepted by larger society serve as tools in the placing of racial and ethnic minority groups in the category of ‘other’ and pits multiple minority groups against each other for jobs to the benefit of whites.<sup>152</sup> The majority’s influence in society leads to laws and legal structures that operate differently for each of these groups. Historical examples include white Americans racializing Japanese and Chinese labour to exploit this labour for railroad building and

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<sup>150</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*. Grove Press, 2008: p. 232.

<sup>151</sup> Fredrickson, George M. *Racism: A short history*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>152</sup> Abrams, Laura S., and Jené A. Moio. "Critical race theory and the cultural competence dilemma in social work education." *Journal of Social Work Education* 45.2 (2009): 245-261; Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge, 2002; Hooks, Bell. *Representing whiteness in the black imagination*. Routledge, 1992.

mining technology, Native Americans for land acquisition, and Italian, Irish, and Mexican migrants for cheap labour.<sup>153</sup>

This variation in practices has shaped each group's history and struggle in America as they fight against different sets of discriminatory laws. Over time, social stereotypes of the various groups have evolved to facilitate society's acquisition of its demands from the group in question. For example, in times of slavery, southern whites manipulated dominant narratives to tell reassuring stories about the black community's acceptance and celebration of their lives of servitude. After slavery was abolished and newly free black Americans began to be perceived as a threat, social images of them were transformed into frightening, larger-than-life figures which justified cruel repression. Similarly, the racialization of Asian Americans has also shifted over time, albeit somewhat in reverse. Although they must now contend with the burden of model minority expectations, during the late 19th century, Asian Americans were an unfavourable group which resulted primarily out of fear that they would consume the labour markets typically controlled by white society, due to their role in inexpensive labour and work. This opposition and concern resulted in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which prevent Asians from gaining American citizenship.<sup>154</sup>

The racialization of minority populations is thus far from static. Racial constructs and meanings are constantly reworked depending on the historical, economic and social context and the appropriation, as well as the needs and agenda of the dominant racial group. In the context of the United States, Claire Jean Kim writes that "differential racialization processes have generated a complex structure of multiple group positions in American society," in which non-European groups have been "racialised...differently from and in relation to one another."<sup>155</sup> However, while the inadequacy of the traditional black and white binary understanding of race has been established, academic theorizing today often replaces one dichotomous structure for another, presuming a definitive ontological and conceptual division between whiteness and non-whiteness, propped up by the controlling forces of white hegemony. There is thus often a tension in reconciling

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<sup>153</sup> Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Temple University Press, 2000.

<sup>154</sup> Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 47.

<sup>155</sup> Kim, Claire Jean. "Imagining race and nation in multiculturalist America." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27.6 (2004): 987-1005, p. 995.

the relationships and interplay between different racisms with their simultaneous imbalance in form, origin, and effects. The white/non-white binary contains the inherent if implicit assumption that experiences of white racism and racialised oppression are generalizable.

While certain ethnic groups from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Spanish-speaking countries have experienced racialization for a few generations, changing demographics and economic interests have made eventually assimilating into the dominant white culture possible for them. After benefiting from this new or de-racialization, descendants of these immigrants, as part of their embrace of white culture, have come to point to the now-ended discrimination their ancestors experienced as proof that the failure of black Americans to thrive – or even survive – is their own fault. Gotanda responds to this unsubstantiated and damaging criticism by pointing out, “Whiteness as racial dominance substantially overlaps, and sometimes supersedes the ethnic experience.”<sup>156</sup> These non-black minority groups, though racialised in real and painful ways, were never subjected to sustained and ongoing legal initiatives designed to disenfranchise and criminalize their activities. Their access to employment opportunities for multiple generations was not systemically barred. The refusal of non-black people of colour to acknowledge the purposeful and continuing persecution of black Americans allows the neo-liberal and post-racial ideal of self-betterment through individual effort to grow. Black communities suffer because the creation and sustenance of a hierarchy of oppression means that, as Derrick Bell describes it, lighter skinned people eventually float to the top of the well.<sup>157</sup>

As a category, the term ‘Asian American’ has been fluid in its definition, shifting from narrow to generous as political and economic trends demand. According to the United States Census, ‘Asian’ comprises less than 5 percent of the American population but spans individuals from over forty-five national origins who speak over a hundred languages and dialects.<sup>158</sup> According to a January 2015 report from centrist think tank

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<sup>156</sup> Gotanda, N. (1995). A critique of “our constitution is colour blind”. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the move-ment* (pp. 257-275). New York, NY: The New Press.

<sup>157</sup> Bell, Derrick A. *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books, 1992.

<sup>158</sup> Bureau, US Census. “Population.” *Census.gov*, [www.census.gov/topics/population.html](http://www.census.gov/topics/population.html).

Third Way, Asian participation in American politics remains relatively low.<sup>159</sup> Although Asians tend to support a range of progressive causes like health care and affirmative action, their limited political power means that they are rarely the targets of campaign outreach. However, the model minority myth has given rise to the idea of Asians as unique collaborators in the state oppression of the black population. Scot Nakagawa of ChangeLab, a grassroots lab focussed on racial justice politics, calls the model minority myth one of the many “levers” of white supremacy and notes that a number of Asians “have internalised the myth, and along with it, negative stereotypes about Black people, making the case through their experiences that the model-minority myth is the flip side of anti-blackness.”<sup>160</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* use the frame of a middle-class family sitcom as a means of negotiating the expectations of differential racialization in a post-racial landscape. Both shows foreground race in their titles, and the realities of their production and progress reveal a dual concern with race and class that reflects the minority struggle against neo-liberal expectations. These shows examine the concerns that surround assimilation and carve out their own creative space to discover an American identity on their own terms beyond the boundaries established by white racialization practices. By adopting a familiar television format, *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* attempt to rearticulate a specific image of American life through the lens of resonating Asian American and black identities.

### ***Fresh Off the Boat* and Asian American sitcoms**

The history of Asian American entertainment on American television is a fraught one. The past three decades have seen many failed attempts at introducing Asian American identity into popular culture. In 1987, *Gung Ho*, a TV comedy about an American car company recently acquired by a Japanese manufacturer, aired just as the U.S. auto industry began its rapid decline and anti-immigrant sentiment was increasing

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<sup>159</sup> Diggles, Michelle. “The Untapped Political Power of Asian Americans.” *Third Way*, [www.thirdway.org/report/the-untapped-political-power-of-Asian-Americans](http://www.thirdway.org/report/the-untapped-political-power-of-Asian-Americans).

<sup>160</sup> “Bringing the Model Minority Mutiny Home.” *Race Files*, 27 Dec. 2016, [www.racefiles.com/2014/12/15/bringing-the-model-minority-mutiny-home/](http://www.racefiles.com/2014/12/15/bringing-the-model-minority-mutiny-home/).

throughout the Rust Belt.<sup>161</sup> The lowest rated program in 1987, *Gung Ho* lasted nine episodes before being cancelled. Critic Daniel Ruth wrote in the *Chicago Sun-Times*,

‘Gung Ho’...is one of the more overtly racist television series to hit the airwaves since ‘Amos and Andy.’ But since the jokes are directed toward the Japanese, who represent something of a minority’s minority in the United States, ABC may be gambling that ‘Gung Ho’ will generate a minimum of protest.<sup>162</sup>

Television’s appeals to the ‘minority’s minority’ continued with the show *Ohara*. Pat Morita, already a familiar face thanks to the success of The Karate Kid film series, played a Japanese-American police lieutenant named Ohara who used the power of meditation to solve crimes in Los Angeles. Ohara was prone to vaguely ‘oriental’ platitudes like, “The winter is cold, but the robin has a song to sing” or “The ox without a cart is only good for slaughter.”<sup>163</sup>

Following *Ohara*’s cancellation after two seasons, *Vanishing Son* became notable as one of the first American dramas to portray Asian American men as attractive and desirable. This hour-long martial arts drama – part of Universal TV’s ‘Action Pack’ block in the mid-1990s – alongside *Hercules*, *Bandit* and *TekWar* featured Russell Wong as Jian-Wa Chang, a musician who escapes to the United States with his brother after a student crackdown in Beijing. When his brother is killed, Jian-Wa is framed for his murder and spends the rest of the 13-episode series using his wisdom, music, and martial arts abilities to problem-solve, relying on what Jeff Yip of the Los Angeles Times called “a rather large dose of hunk factor” to draw in largely female audiences.<sup>164</sup>

The most often cited appearance of an Asian American family on television, however, is *All-American Girl*. As mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, the

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<sup>161</sup> A few years earlier in Detroit, a Chinese-American named Vincent Chin had been mistaken for a Japanese auto worker and beaten to death. Wu, Frank H. “Why Vincent Chin Matters.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 June 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/06/23/opinion/why-vincent-chin-matters.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/23/opinion/why-vincent-chin-matters.html).

<sup>162</sup> “ABC tries hard with ‘Dads,’ but not ‘Gung Ho’.” *HighBeam Research - Newspaper archives and journal articles*, Chicago Sun-Times, [www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-3798983.html](http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-3798983.html).

<sup>163</sup> LEE MARGULIES | Times Staff Writer. “Weekend Tv : ‘Walking On Air’ Opens ‘wonderworks’ Season.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 17 Jan. 1987, [articles.latimes.com/1987-01-17/entertainment/ca-5081\\_1\\_weekend-tv](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-01-17/entertainment/ca-5081_1_weekend-tv).

<sup>164</sup> Yip, Jeff.. “A Heroic Leading Role for One Asian ‘Son’ : Television: Russell Wong, star of ‘Vanishing Son,’ knows he’s breaking ground and stereotypes. His character’s ‘got a lot of energy and sex appeal.’” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 25 Mar. 1995, [articles.latimes.com/1995-03-25/entertainment/ca-47026\\_1\\_vanishing-son](http://articles.latimes.com/1995-03-25/entertainment/ca-47026_1_vanishing-son).

show starred Margaret Cho as the daughter of a Korean American family. It was critically panned and quickly faced harsh judgment from outspoken members of the Asian American community.<sup>165</sup> Even with this criticism, it was historical in putting Asian faces on television at a time when even seeing Asians in speaking roles was a rarity. In examining *Fresh Off the Boat's* presence in contemporary culture, it is important to first look back at *All-American Girl* to see what has changed about American culture and what has remained the same.

Cho broke into the entertainment industry through her stand-up comedy act. Her unique perspective about growing up with Korean immigrant parents in the melting pot of San Francisco was significant in contributing to her popularity as a fresh comic voice. She broke new ground for women through her openness in addressing race, gender, and sexuality. It was likely that American audiences would not have seen a comedian like her on television before. However, instead of capitalizing on Cho's popularity as an acerbic comedian, the storyline and characters that appeared on *All-American Girl* were watered down, two-dimensional ideas of what assimilated Asian Americans should look like.

The show mostly focused on a fictional Margaret Kim and her dating life while balancing the stereotypical demands of her Korean parents. The edgy spirit of her act was nowhere to be found on the television show, even though it claimed to be based on material from Cho's stand-up. The "All-American" idea reinforced the model minority myth of the good Asian immigrants who arrived on the shores of the United States to excel in math and provide takeout food while quietly going about their lives. Rather than highlighting the immigrant experience, *All-American Girl's* title shot focused on red, white, and blue ribbons unfolding, effectively reassuring its viewers that the show's characters were 'just like them' and that the program would not focus on any racial and ethnic differences that might make white audiences uncomfortable.<sup>166</sup>

In retrospect, this was to be expected as family sitcoms of the 1990s were saccharine and often limited character development to annoying catchphrases and 'Very

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<sup>165</sup> One of critics was writer Jeff Yang, who said Cho looked "like a P.O.W. who's been tranquilised and forced to recite propaganda by her captors." He's now the father of Hudson Yang, who stars in FOTB as young Eddie Huang. Yang, Jeff. "Why the 'Fresh Off the Boat' TV Series Could Change the Game." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 2 May 2014, [blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/05/02/why-fresh-off-the-boat-tv-series-could-change-the-game/](https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2014/05/02/why-fresh-off-the-boat-tv-series-could-change-the-game/).

<sup>166</sup> Jacobs, Gary, prod. "Pilot." *All-American Girl*. ABC: 14 September 1994. DVD.

Special Episodes'. Yet other middle-class shows, like *Full House* and *Home Improvement*, which were overwhelmingly white did not have to deal with the pressure of having to represent an entire population of people. *All-American Girl* faced scrutiny for issues that other shows were not even asked to consider. There were questions about the appropriateness of accents and whether it was suitable to cast non-Korean Asian actors to play Cho's family. Cho herself faced an extra set of challenges as a woman in the entertainment industry. Shortly before the show filmed, she was told she needed to lose a lot of weight quickly. On the show's DVD commentary track, she admitted that the drastic weight loss left her feeling famished and unable to concentrate during tapings. She recounts a moment in her on-set trailer where she urinated blood as her body broke down.<sup>167</sup> Cho sacrificed her personal voice as well as her physical wellbeing for the show but it failed anyway, in large part because *All-American Girl* suffered from a fundamentally pro-assimilation point of view that relied on mining the otherness of Korean culture for cheap laughs, particularly through the broadly stereotyped mother and grandmother characters.<sup>168</sup> Cho's teenage protagonist with her white friends and All-American ways, served as a model of a minority "cool" (read: assimilated) enough not to be preoccupied with old-country traditions.

The failure of *All-American Girl* can be attributed to the fact that it never really sought to be about Cho and her specific experience as a Korean American woman. Instead, it was whitewashed into a celluloid version of what TV executives wanted her to be. Still, the show both offered Asian Americans – and other minorities paying attention – a tantalizing glimpse of what representation could look like while also acting as a cautionary tale against selling out one's vision for perceived commercial viability.

Although the intervening decades have seen a slow but steady increase in the available roles for Asian American actors on television, the debut of *Fresh Off the Boat* on ABC in February 2015 was the first time that an Asian American family was back at the centre of a primetime television show. It is with the lessons from Cho fresh in mind that *Fresh Off the Boat* looks to build off *All-American Girl*'s foundation in the Asian American

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<sup>167</sup> Tiger, Caroline. *Margaret Cho*. Infobase Publishing, 2009: p. 41.

<sup>168</sup> At the 2015 Golden Globes, Cho courted controversy with her heavily stereotypical North Korean general character. Cho responded to critics of her bit by claiming that she was playing "the rice card." Chasmar, Jessica. "Margaret Cho defends North Korean bit at Golden Globes: 'I'm playing the rice card'." *The Washington Times*, The Washington Times, 13 Jan. 2015, [www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/13/margaret-cho-defends-north-korean-bit-at-golden-gl/](http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/13/margaret-cho-defends-north-korean-bit-at-golden-gl/).



community. When the ABC sitcom based on the eponymous memoir of writer and chef Eddie Huang was announced in 2014, many people closely followed its development, an anticipation that stemmed from growing up in front of the television and not seeing familiar faces reflected back.

*Fresh Off the Boat* follows a fictionalised Huang at age 11 in 1995, as he and his family adjust to a new life and new neighbours, after moving from Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown to a white suburb of Orlando, Florida. "There is opportunity here to make a better life for our family," Eddie's father, Louis (Randall Park), insists despite the scepticism and dismay of his uprooted wife and sons. However, even before a single episode of *Fresh Off the Boat* aired, the show courted controversy on two notable fronts: One, from those who found the show's name offensive, and two, from Huang's own admission that he had regretted selling his story because it was watered down into a neatly packaged sitcom for a white audience.

### **'Fresh off the boat' etymology**

The reaction garnered by the show's title is unsurprising. It is a valid reflection of the unease that continues to surround this centuries-old slur that targets new immigrants. However, critical and popular rejection of the name ignores how the term '*Fresh Off the Boat*' (or 'FOB', pronounced 'fob') has also evolved as a cultural touchstone within contemporary Asian American culture. Although it is not uniquely Asian American, it has strong Asian American connotations and a specific cultural significance for members of that community. The show deploys it as obvious 'insider' language, promising content that could educate audiences of the term's nuances, which live between insult and humorously assertive self-deprecation.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, most English-speaking countries used '*Fresh Off the Boat*' as a colloquialism to refer to new immigrants (i.e. those who were literally "*Fresh Off the Boat*" from their home countries), and in America, the phrase was popular in port cities like New York City where it was commonly used, for example, to describe newly-arrived Irish American immigrants.<sup>169</sup> The term expanded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe the large influx of non-white Irish and Asian immigrants.

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<sup>169</sup> Barkan, Elliott Robert. *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration*. ABC-CLIO, 2012: p. 422.

However, its popularity declined in the early decades of the 20th century in America because of two reasons: one, exclusionary immigration laws significantly limited the entrance of Asian immigrants, and two, European American immigrants became more and more associated with racial whiteness, mitigating their perceived foreignness.

The term, this time pronounced according to its acronym, “F.O.B.” (“eff-oh-bee”) was resuscitated as a common descriptor for a foreign immigrant – particularly in reference to Asian and Latino Americans – in the late 1960s following the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act which reopened America’s doors to an immigration influx. Its resurgence and current popular usage is therefore associated predominantly with the xenophobic fears surrounding non-white immigrants that took hold in the late 1960s.<sup>170</sup>

An honest assessment of ‘fresh off the boat’ as a complex term requires recognition of its origins as an archaic slur with distinctly racialised overtones. However, as is often the case with slurs, “F.O.B.” was appropriated by members of the target community – Asian Americans as well as other immigrant groups – where they took on more gradated meanings. Shalini Shankar observes that in the Asian American community, the term “F.O.B.” was “widely used in Asian diasporas through the late 1960’s-80’s, especially in the context of post-1965 Asian migration, to differentiate new arrivals from those who have learned requisite cultural and linguistic codes.”<sup>171</sup> By the 1990s, the “F.O.B.” slur had evolved in Asian American youth culture to refer not just to an individual but to an entire sub-cultural “FOB” style.<sup>172</sup> This marks the turning point of the word’s usage as a form of “insider” language in the Asian American community with a meaning distinct from its mainstream appearances.

Whereas “FOB” is unequivocally derogatory when deployed within the white mainstream, in the Asian American community, the term’s meaning is more nuanced and complex. For example, in a 2004 study of an ESL class, Steven Talmy observes that recent immigrants sought to distance themselves from the term, viewing it as “a noxious label signifying a recently-arrived, monumentally uncool, non-English-speaking rube of

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<sup>170</sup> Lee, Jonathan HX, and Kathleen M. Nadeau, eds. *Encyclopedia of Asian American folklore and folklife*. *Abc-Clio*, 2010: p. 224

<sup>171</sup> Shankar, Shalini. “Speaking like a model minority: “FOB” styles, gender, and racial meanings among Desi teens in Silicon Valley.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18.2 (2008): 268-289 (p. 270).

<sup>172</sup> Shankar, 2008, p. 271.

mythical, and for some, hilarious proportions.”<sup>173</sup> However, the 1980s saw Asian Americans challenge fundamental assumptions of “FOB” as inherently undesirable by rejecting its assumption of cultural and linguistic assimilation with (white) Americans as a positive necessity. Instead, “FOBs” could be viewed as being more in touch with their heritage and language and thus more culturally radical as they eschewed cultural white-washing. While “FOB” is still largely pejorative today, this identity has become a point of pride for some Asian Americans. Wong et al. describe a community of Asian Americans in San Francisco where second- or third-generation Asian American youth are rejecting Americanization to embrace “FOB” clothing and style, seen as prestigious by other students of both Asian and non-Asian heritage.<sup>174</sup>

These efforts to reject cultural assimilation and reclaim the term ‘fresh off the boat’ as a positive identity for immigrants is what Eddie Huang invokes in his writing and public engagements. Speaking to BuzzFeed, he says,

I would never call myself an American... [With *Fresh Off the Boat*] I want to represent the Asian American story, but even more than that, this is a coming-of-age story. I hate when people say ‘finding your place in America’ or ‘fitting in’ — those are assimilation words. This is about creating your place in America. It’s not about fitting into one reference group, because fuck it, I’m going to make you adjust to my life.<sup>175</sup>

Despite Huang’s intent, the inherent issues that come with the attempt to reclaim any racial slur cannot be denied. Efforts to assert “FOB” pride do not erase the racialised and racist history of “FOB” and its predecessor terms as a word that was used by non-Asians to marginalize Asian immigrants. Consequently, the conversation about reclaiming the slur is itself complex and sensitive and warrants investigation in popular culture.

The conflict implied by the name is an authentically Asian American trope, one that raises issues that can be uncomfortable but still fundamental to understanding what it means to be Asian American. ‘Fresh Off the Boat’ may be a pejorative term, but as a title

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<sup>173</sup> Talmy, Steven. “Forever FOB: The cultural production of ESL in a high school.” *Pragmatics* 14.2/3 (2004): 149-172 (p. 150).

<sup>174</sup> Wong, Amy Wing-mei, and Lauren Hall-Lew. “Regional variability and ethnic identity: Chinese Americans in New York City and San Francisco.” *Language & Communication* 35 (2014): 27-42.

<sup>175</sup> Jha, Tanya Chen Rega. “Author Behind ABC’s Asian American Sitcom ‘Fresh Off The Boat’ Will Not Apologize For Its Title.” *BuzzFeed*, [www.buzzfeed.com/tanyachen/fresh-off-the-boat-author-responds](http://www.buzzfeed.com/tanyachen/fresh-off-the-boat-author-responds).

for Huang's story, it rings truer than one that overtly seeks to assuage fears about non-assimilation (*Far East Orlando* was another title that was briefly considered). The choice to use a self-deprecating and even derogatory term like "FOB" for the title of the show may be troubling to some but it also signals an ambitious effort to have an Asian American and immigrant narrative – not a white American one – guide the sitcom's exploratory drive.

### ***Fresh Off the Boat* as memoir**

Building on the provocative title, the show's themes mirror those in Huang's memoir, though at a somewhat less radical level. The book follows a great American narrative - self-reinvention through adversity forged in the experiences of racism. In his words, Huang's writing is an attempt to understand "How something so stupid as skin or eyes or stinky Chinese lunch has such an impact on a person's identity."<sup>176</sup> Its narrative contains stories of racist humiliations subtle and overt: from peers, from authority figures, and, most crushingly, from family members and other Asian Americans who have internalised and re-enacted racial self-hatred. Growing up in the south, Huang was forced to endure taunts of "chink" and "chigger" from peers on a regular basis while also trying to survive physical abuse from his strict and traditionalist parents, leading him to revolutionize his identity out of conservative oppression. When Huang's childhood neighbours trash his birthday party, he makes a resolution:

I refused to be that Chinese kid walking everywhere with his head down. I wanted my dignity, my identity, and my pride back...There were no free passes on my soul and everything they stole from me I decided I'd take back double.<sup>177</sup>

Later in his life, as part of an arrest and plea deal for aggravated assault and third-degree murder, Huang goes to Taiwan to wait out his probation. Seeing Taiwanese people in "suits, in sandals, in tank tops, in Iverson jerseys, with mole-hair growths, without mole-hair growths,"<sup>178</sup> provides him with an escape from America's racialised images.

Huang acknowledges the limitation of choices in modern America for Asians, Latinos, and other minorities, but falls into the trap himself of binarizing options for self-

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<sup>176</sup> Huang, Eddie. *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir*. Spiegel & Grau, 2013, p. 249.

<sup>177</sup> Huang, 2013, p. 81.

<sup>178</sup> Huang, 2013, p. 186.

identification. According to Huang, at some point during their childhood, most Americans must decide to either socialize “white” – non-confrontational, buttoned-down, conservative, guitar music – or “black” – oppositional, street, radical, hip-hop. He writes, humorously, that for him the decision was quick. Visiting his white friend Jeff’s house, Huang is filled at first with envy at his toys and wealth: “I wanted to be white so fucking bad. But then dinner happened.”<sup>179</sup> Huang’s aversion to “white people food” led him to abandon his assimilative desires.

In his writing, Huang seems to reject the ‘model minority’ myth of success through middle-class striving and disdains conservative ‘traitors’ as much as he does white racists: “Your community actually wants you to sell the fuck out and work in law, accounting, or banking. But I realised then that I wasn’t going to cross the picket line just to get a nut.”<sup>180</sup> Yet, as a child of the hip-hop era, he absorbed and embodied both the hope and jadedness of his rapper idols that is closely linked to upwards financial mobility, applying his distinctly Asian American story to the rags-to-riches rapper mythology. In making a name for himself, he adopts a capitalist-centric motto often espoused in hip-hop: “I realised that if I wanted to see change in the world, I need to make dollars first,”<sup>181</sup> and begins carving a path for himself by honing his cooking skills and starting a business selling Taiwanese baos.

Huang’s resistance to his own pigeonholing takes a strange and abrasive form when he attempts to articulate it in relation to the larger racial narrative. It might appear that someone who is aware of the precarious state occupied by minorities, and who claims to resist this weaponizing of this position as a tool of antiblackness would not engage in erasure of his own, yet Huang has referred to himself as “the dude who can cross the union line” and appears willing to cross this line readily. In an April 2015 appearance on *Real Time With Bill Maher*, Huang said, “I feel like Asian men have been emasculated so much in America that we’re basically treated like black women.”<sup>182</sup> This comment rightly drew the ire of many, black women themselves in particular<sup>183</sup>. For

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<sup>179</sup> Huang, 2013, p. 40.

<sup>180</sup> Huang, 2013, p. 110.

<sup>181</sup> Huang, 2013, p. 224.

<sup>182</sup> Callahan, Yesha. “Fresh Off the Boat’s Eddie Huang Responds to Steve Harvey.” *The Grapevine*, Thegrapevine.theroot.com, 17 Jan. 2017, thegrapevine.theroot.com/fresh-off-the-boats-eddie-huang-responds-to-steve-harve-1791281571.

<sup>183</sup> See “When Asian Emasculation Meets Misogyny: On Eddie Huang’s Black Feminist Problem.” *Race Files*, 27 Dec. 2016, [www.racefiles.com/2015/05/07/when-asian-emasculatation-meets-misogyny-on-](http://www.racefiles.com/2015/05/07/when-asian-emasculatation-meets-misogyny-on-)

example, the creator of the blog Black Girl Dangerous called Huang out on his harmful behaviour and specific disdain for black women, tweeting, “You’re a misogynoirist. Leave me alone.”<sup>184</sup> In response to this backlash, Huang did not apologize but instead doubled down on his statements, becoming first defensive, then dismissive, then outright sexist as he called black feminists “bums”.<sup>185</sup>

Huang’s reaction is reflective of a persona is built on masculinity defined through violence. In his memoir, recounting an incident in which a friend failed to back him up in a fight, Huang describes him “sitting in a Toyota Celica smoking Parliament lights like a fuckin’ female.”<sup>186</sup> It is an attitude crafted to bolster a street-wise image, where manhood is bounded by aggression and defended through force. Guided by his all-male crew, his first response to the grotesquery of racism is an indiscriminate violence that views all those outside his immediate circle of recognition as equal opportunity targets.

In 2012, Huang directed his anger at Marcus Samuelsson, a black chef, criticizing the way “foodie” versions of local cuisine turn restaurants into a bastion for gentrification. Huang saw himself as having the right to call out as condescending what he saw as another chef’s efforts to “class up” Harlem cuisine, but in labelling Samuelsson’s manifestation of black identity as “admirable, heartbreaking and confused,” Huang perpetuated a more insidious form of racial condescension.

Huang’s comments reveal a pride in his own lack of confusion about his racial identity, a certainty that is predicated on the ‘realness’ of his writing. He defends his memoir, with its challenging relationship to racial identification by slamming the inauthenticity of anything in the *Fresh Off the Boat* show that deviates from it. Huang does not acknowledge that there are things in the show that may ring more true for some Asian American viewers than his memoir does because his experience is not universal. In this

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[eddie-huangs-black-feminist-problem/](#); “There Can Be No Room in this Movement for Misogyny.” *Reappropriate*, 7 May 2015, [reappropriate.co/2015/05/there-can-be-no-room-in-this-movement-for-misogyny/](#); “Black Feminists Rally Against ‘Fresh Off The Boat’s” Eddie Huang.” *Clutch Magazine*, [clutchmagonline.com/2015/05/black-feminists-rally-against-fresh-off-the-boats-eddie-huang/](#).

<sup>184</sup> BGD (BGDblog). “You’re a misogynoirist. Leave me alone.” 27 April 2015, 12.51 p.m. Tweet. [https://twitter.com/BGDblog/status/592778152528732160](#)

<sup>185</sup> Nakedartichokes. “In Which Eddie Huang calls Black Feminists “bums” (with images, tweets) · nakedartichokes.” *Storify*, [storify.com/nakedartichokes/in-which-eddie-huang-calls-black-feminists-bums](#).

<sup>186</sup> Huang, 2013, p. 173

ongoing quest to claim authenticity, Huang continued to disparage the show months after its premiere, based on the content of episodes of which he was already aware and for which he had even already done voiceover work.

Huang called his friend Melvin Mar, a producer for *Fresh Off the Boat*, an “Uncle Chan,” his version of an “Uncle Tom.”<sup>187</sup> In tarring Mar with this term, whose role at the network is one that depends on his ability to market the show to executives as well as viewers, Huang absolves himself of being labelled with the epithet for selling his rights to ABC in the first place. By casting the first stone, Huang safeguards his own integrity as a ‘real’ Asian American.

In many ways, Huang’s memoir enacts the personal as political and exposes America’s brutalities towards a largely silenced group. Huang’s political weapon is his own image, a wrench in the mill of oft-regurgitated Asian American tropes. His anger over a lifetime of being told how to be is evident and easily comprehended. Yet instead of using that anger to punch up and perhaps clear a space for others in similar positions, he perceives as threats to his position of safety those who seek to follow him in forging paths of their own within the strict confines of white supremacy.

### ***Fresh Off the Boat* and white/black culture**

The scrutiny placed on *Fresh Off the Boat* in the lead-up to its debut was inevitable not only because of the immense lack of representation of Asian Americans in mainstream media, but also due to the marginalization of the immigrant experience in the ongoing narrative of what it means to be an American. From the very start of its pilot, titled ‘Forever Dreaming’, *Fresh Off the Boat* sets out its intentions of subverting the white gaze, poking fun at the ignorance and blandness of white Americans and white culture of the 1990s. The Huang family frequently point out the myriad odd behaviours and preferences of white people. Eddie’s mother, Jessica (Constance Wu) is confused by the mob of blonde, white, rollerblading neighbourhood moms; by how a child’s straight-Cs could be satisfactory to white parents; or by the cold sterility of a big box grocery store

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<sup>187</sup> Chien, Chris. “Of Uncle Chans and Rotten Bananas: The Adaptational Politics of Eddie Huang’s.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/of-uncle-chans-and-rotten-bananas-the-adaptational-politics-of-eddie-huang-s-fresh-off-the-boat/](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/of-uncle-chans-and-rotten-bananas-the-adaptational-politics-of-eddie-huang-s-fresh-off-the-boat/).

in contrast to the lively Chinese markets to which she is accustomed.<sup>188</sup> Jessica and Eddie go to the market because he wants “white people food” to bring for lunch at school. Here, it is not the Asian American family and their strange food and customs that are the punchline; rather, it is the clueless neighbours who use ‘exotic’ as a catchall descriptor and are unable to tolerate anything beyond the blandest of cuisines who bear the brunt of subtle mockery.

This subversion of a traditionally anti-immigrant narrative on conventional family sitcoms is notable, yet *Fresh Off the Boat* still relies racial landscape that goes beyond the white/non-white binary. Echoing Huang’s real life as sketched out in his memoir, Young Eddie (Hudson Yang) navigates the complexities of an Asian American childhood using hip-hop and, by extension, black culture. When the audience is first introduced to Eddie, the camera pulls back from a close up to show his tiny figure swathed in the baggy, brightly coloured clothes synonymous with the hip-hop uniform of the 90s, and little Eddie strikes a now-familiar pose: his arms high across his chest, crossed defiantly, his head nodding. This universal symbol of (black) insubordination was now being deployed to signify a little Asian boy’s discomfort with his recent relocation from Washington D.C.’s Chinatown to the bright, bland landscape of suburban Florida. Young Eddie fully intends to shock with his wardrobe, using it to posture intimidation towards bullies and parents alike. While his peers and parents sing along to Ace of Base and Bonnie Raitt, Huang Eddie’s internal soundtrack features, among others, hip-hop giants Notorious B.I.G., Nas, and Ol’ Dirty Bastard. “If you were an outsider, hip-hop was your anthem, and I was definitely the black sheep of my family,” Eddie’s voiceover explains.<sup>189</sup>

The fictional Eddie’s mannerisms, dress and outlook are imbued with a hip-hop aesthetic but hip-hop is not presented as much more than a youthful fascination for him. Unlike for Huang, music is not an escape from an abusive childhood and school bullying, and all-around cultural but only the setup for a joke, or the punchline itself. That hip-hop acts as a cultural framework for how Eddie interacts with American ideals is especially poignant given that the show is set a mere three years after the L.A. riots exposed deep divisions, resentment and anger between the city’s black and Asian communities. Yet the

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<sup>188</sup> When she first sees them, she asks if they’re all sisters – an inversion of the ‘all Asian people look alike’ trope. Khan, Nahnatchka, prod. “Pilot.” *Fresh Off the Boat*. ABC: 4 February 2015. DVD.

<sup>189</sup> Khan, Nahnatchka, prod. “Pilot.” *Fresh Off the Boat*. ABC: 4 February 2015. DVD.



show seems reluctant to do anything more complicated with this history than to draw a superficial equivalence between Asian and African American outsider statuses.

*Fresh Off the Boat* does attempt to set up a complicated racial interaction in the pilot, when Eddie abandons the sole black student's cafeteria table for the chance to buddy up with cool, Notorious B.I.G.-loving white kids, only to be rejected by the white kids for eating Chinese food. Walter, the black student, sees a chance to move one step up in the social hierarchy and calls Eddie a "chink." Eddie, previously calm in the face of a white kid's taunts that "Ying Ming is eating worms" – loses his temper and gets into a fight with Walter.

Moments like this remind the audience about the different set of rules minorities are often made to follow and how uncommon it is to see them delineated on TV: When Eddie's parents came in to discuss the racial slur, they reverse the usually apologetic script and ask the principal how such language could be allowed school. It was a teachable moment that gave voice to the anger of Eddie's parents instead of bolstering the racist system they were trying to work within. Being a parent means fighting the battles of one's children, but *Fresh Off the Boat* takes that television staple and pairs it with the raised stakes of an extraordinary effort to assimilate to white culture. This scene, from the moment Eddie is called a racial slur to the end of the meeting with the principal, does more to evoke the multi-layered, intersectional reality of most immigrants and minorities than most television shows are able and willing to in the course of a season.

In isolation, the slur can be seen act of pre-teen territorial marking, some standard name calling to provoke anger. However, by having it be a black student hurling the slur, *Fresh Off the Boat* hints at something more complicated than that – what Eddie and Walter both want most is to be accepted by their white schoolmates. Here was a moment when *Fresh Off the Boat* could explore fascinating themes—whites' and Asians' simultaneous embrace of black culture and rejection of black people, the internecine struggle between different communities of colour—if it had the courage. Unfortunately, the pilot backs away from the complexities of the cafeteria encounter, taking refuge in a simplistic voiceover by Eddie that attempts to cast a hip-hop sensibility on the classic immigrant narrative:

When you live in a Lunchables world, it's not always easy bringing homemade Chinese food, but it's also what makes you special...Because you don't have to pretend to be someone else in order to belong. Like B.I.G. said, "If you don't know, now you know."<sup>190</sup>

Another earlier moment of greater racial complexity in the pilot also goes overlooked. Eddie, faced with the possibility of having to sit at the lunch table with the uncool Walter works his way to a seat at the cool (white) kids table. A potential fight with a loudmouthed white student is diffused when he sees Eddie's Notorious B.I.G. t-shirt. He perks up and says, "I bought *Ready To Die* the day it came out!" to which Eddie replies, "You bought it? I STOLE it." As Eddie gets up to leave Walter sitting alone at his table, the latter, pointing out the absurdity of a black student being boxed out of a conversation that uses blackness as cultural capital, says, "A white dude and an Asian dude bonding over a black dude. This cafeteria is ridiculous."<sup>191</sup>

This line speaks to the deeper problem of how Asian American subjecthood is positioned relation to other minorities, especially black people. Black cultural expression is largely rooted in an underdog experience because black creativity often profoundly investigates the question of how to live when the system conspires to bring down a people.

The show's third episode features a plot in which Eddie tries to shed this outsider status through a plan inspired by the ODB song, "Shimmy Shimmy Ya," which, a voiceover informs the audience, has taught him that, "a hot girl was the ultimate status symbol."<sup>192</sup> In a fantasy sequence, Eddie squirts a Capri Sun over the body of Honey (Chelsea Crisp), the attractive blonde neighbour whom Eddie thinks is his ticket out of social purgatory. Writing for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Wesley Yang notes that the real life Huang "considered the thrust of the episode outright offensive," saying that the bit

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<sup>190</sup> Khan, Nahnatchka, prod. "Pilot." *Fresh Off the Boat*. ABC: 4 February 2015. DVD.

<sup>191</sup> The episode 'Phillip Goldstein', the eight of the show's first season returns to the rift between Eddie and Walter by having the two of them bond over the Beastie Boys: "An Asian kid and a black kid bonding over music by white Jewish rappers. America's crazy." Khan, Nahnatchka, prod. "Phillip Goldstein." *Fresh Off the Boat*. ABC: 10 March 2015. DVD.

<sup>192</sup> Khan, Nahnatchka, prod. "The Shunning." *Fresh Off the Boat*. ABC: 10 February 2015. DVD.

“denigrates hip-hop culture by portraying it as a vector for adopting sexist attitudes – a perversion of what, for him, had been a vital emotional outlet.”<sup>193</sup>

In a scene from the fourth episode, ‘Success Perm’, Eddie’s grandmothers (Lucille Soong and Shu Lan Tuan), become fixated on the round-the-clock coverage of the OJ Simpson trial, and up mistaking a black repo man for Simpson himself. The moment is set up as a moment of levity that mocks uninformed Asian attitudes toward blackness, yet it sits uneasily as an odd, uncritical depiction of racial ignorance.<sup>194</sup> This would be jarring on any show, but it is especially galling to see as part of a narrative that hinges on defying stereotypes.

Huang’s love of hip-hop is vital, but when there is a difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation, which side does the show fall on? On *Fresh Off the Boat*, hip-hop appears solely when it is repurposed in the hands of white or Asian kids. What young Eddie aspires to the most is the image he has formed in his head of black masculinity. He wants ‘honeys’ paying him close attention and a soundtrack to go with his swagger. This works as sitcom fodder because to the viewer what could be more diametrically opposed to the image of black rappers than a ‘good’ Asian boy, eating his vegetables, doing his homework, and listening to his typically domineering mother? This juxtaposition is undoubtedly entertaining, but the fact that viewers are meant to find it comedic without question affirms, on some level, that the legitimacy of cultural representations of the Asian American struggle is predicated on the ability to render one’s self distinct and individual at the expense of other minorities.

The lived reality of Asian Americans does overlap with that of other people of colour, but to mistake racial solidarity for actual experiences of black marginalization in this country to substitute appropriation for empathy. For all of the racialised stigmatization that Eddie endures, the black experience is ultimately beyond his grasp as evidenced by how he derives much of his personal identity from hip-hop and black culture in general without any of the racially-specific disadvantages. This appropriation is all the more damaging in light of the antiblack racism that exists within Asian American communities. Asian Americans face an interesting predicament: While they grapple with

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<sup>193</sup> Yang, Wesley. “Eddie Huang Against the World.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Feb. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/magazine/eddie-huang-against-the-world.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/magazine/eddie-huang-against-the-world.html?_r=0).

<sup>194</sup> Khan, Nahnatchka, prod. “Success Perm.” *Fresh Off the Boat*. ABC: 10 February 2015. DVD.

systematic discrimination, they still have the privilege of not-blackness, granting them access to all sorts of cultural and economic privileges that black people are still denied to this day.

The uneasy tension of respectability politics as it pertains to self-expression crops up when Jessica asks Eddie about his sartorial style.

Jessica: Why do all of your shirts have black men on them?

Eddie: It's Notorious B.I.G. Both me and him are two dudes with mad dreams, just trying to get a little respect in the game.

What Jessica sees as rebellion against cultural assimilation is in fact Eddie's cultivation of a social position reliant on outsider status. He uses the language and posture of hip-hop to cement his social status as a subversive character, and in doing so forces the audience to recognize the discomfort of representations that lack contextualization of the historical lessons of dominant culture and the power structures that uphold them. Tami Winfrey Harris writes,

A Japanese teen wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the logo of a big American company is not the same as Madonna sporting a bindi as part of her latest reinvention. The difference is history and power. Colonization has made Western Anglo culture supreme—powerful and coveted. It is understood in its diversity and nuance as other cultures can only hope to be. Ignorance of culture that is a burden to Asians, African and indigenous peoples, is unknown to most European descendants or at least lacks the same negative impact.<sup>195</sup>

It matters who is doing the appropriating. If a dominant culture exoticises an element of a minority culture but otherwise disdains its members and seeks to marginalize them, it becomes an insult. Eddie is not part of the dominant culture and thus sees identification with black culture as a way to combat his essential powerlessness. In a series of tweets on his now-deleted Twitter account, Huang railed against the TV show for being void of anything resembling his actual experience:

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<sup>195</sup> Quoted in Henderson, Danielle. "'Fresh Off the Boat' uses black culture to talk more candidly about Asian culture." *Splinter*, Splinternews.com, 11 Feb. 2015, [splinternews.com/fresh-off-the-boat-uses-black-culture-to-talk-more-cand-1793845197](http://splinternews.com/fresh-off-the-boat-uses-black-culture-to-talk-more-cand-1793845197).

I didn't understand how network television, the one-size fits-all antithesis to *Fresh Off the Boat*, was going to house the voice of a futuristic chinkstronaut. I began to regret ever selling the book, because *Fresh Off the Boat* was a very specific narrative about SPECIFIC moments in my life, such as kneeling in a driveway holding buckets of rice overhead or seeing pink nipples for the first time. The network's approach was to tell a universal, ambiguous, cornstarch story about Asian Americans resembling moo goo gai pan written by a Persian-American who cut her teeth on race relations writing for Seth MacFarlane. But who is that show written for?<sup>196</sup>

In a conversation with Ta-nehisi Coates at the New York Ideas festival, Huang talked at length about race, identity and hip-hop. When Coates called him a hip-hop head and asked when Huang first felt like he was a kindred spirit to black culture, Huang drew a clear connection to his life at home and violence in the music.

"I was drawn to it, and I felt a similarity with it, because I grew up in a home where my parents beat me, right? ...[W]hen I heard Pac talking about these things, and I heard all this music that was at many times laced with violence, I was a little desensitised towards it. It didn't put me off. It was not, like, a barrier to my entry. So I would listen. I wasn't listening for the violence, though, because I think hip-hop is much deeper, but when that's what you grow up with—parents hitting you and things like that—that's part of your DNA and fabric whether you like it or not. And a lot of people ask me would you do it different, and I said yeah, I won't hit my kids like my father beat me, right? But also, they ask me, would you be the same person that you are, and I say absolutely not. And this is the gift and the curse, and I have to be honest about it. I do not encourage people hitting their children, but I would absolutely not be the same person."<sup>197</sup>

Huang expresses frustration over what he feels is the exclusionary nature of most conversations about race, which to him centres black and white voices to the exclusion of others. Yet Huang's reaction to this exclusion, which has been to essentialise ideas of blackness, is not the needed response for the contemporary moment. However, it does

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<sup>196</sup> Huang, Eddie. "Network TV Ate My Life: Eddie Huang on Watching His Memoir Become a Sitcom." *Vulture*, 4 Feb. 2015, [www.vulture.com/2015/01/eddie-huang-fresh-off-the-boat-abc.html](http://www.vulture.com/2015/01/eddie-huang-fresh-off-the-boat-abc.html).

<sup>197</sup> Henderson, 2015

force a confrontation of the question of what it means for a group to embrace a culture outside its wheelhouse. Huang's professional career allows him to hang up cultural affectations of hip-hop and blackness whenever it is expedient for him. He may decry code switching but it remains accessible to him in a way that it is not for members of the black community. In playing with this fluidity, *Fresh Off the Boat* asks – but does not necessarily answer – what defines black culture, and to whom does it belong? It allows the audience to consider the experience of being a non-white person in America from a non-white perspective, while trying to navigate the internal resonance of black and non-black persons of colour relationships in an age of media obsessed with post-raciality, opening the door to how American minorities both tear down and lean on each other to survive.

### ***Black-ish* and racial honesty**

When *The Cosby Show* debuted in 1985, its creators gambled that audiences would embrace a sitcom about an upper-middle-class African American family. While that bet proved successful, this success spurred a host of new concerns. As Mark Whitaker writes in his biography on Bill Cosby, the show's mammoth success led (white) reviewers and journalists to question its realism; in other words, people were asking: were there really upscale black people? Paralleling that critique, black commentators were accusing the show of being wilfully blind towards black social issues, if not outright branding those involved in this neutralizing of concerns of being Uncle Toms.<sup>198</sup>

Race was not irrelevant to *The Cosby Show*, nor were the Huxtables people who 'just happened to be black,' a favourite refrain of post-racial advocates. On the contrary, black art and culture were often highlighted and celebrated on the show.<sup>199</sup> However, it is fair to say that the show was not textually 'about' being black, a choice intentionally made by those behind the scenes. The show adhered to the unspoken rule of thumb of talking about race on black sitcoms – limit how much it is done. Cosby was aware that audiences could be put off by the impression that a show was trying to send them a message that implied their own lack of racial awareness and consideration. The Cosby

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<sup>198</sup> Whitaker, Mark. *Cosby: His Life and Times*. Simon and Schuster, 2014.

<sup>199</sup> For example, the family gathered to watch the "I Have a Dream" speech, days before the inaugural Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1986. Carsey, Marcy, prod. "Vanessa's Bad Grade." *The Cosby Show*. NBC: 9 January 1986. DVD.

Show set the template for most of the successful shows that followed in the next few decades, subtly highlighting the need to avoid the topic of race almost entirely in order to achieve commercial popularity. Race was relegated to occasional breaks in levity, when a show would take on a 'serious' tone, working in a plotline where unambiguous discrimination was at play.

*Black-ish*, a new ABC sitcom created by veteran TV writer Kenya Barris, appears to mark the beginning of a deviation from this line of reasoning by engaging with race from the moment its title card appears. The show follows Andre 'Dre' Johnson (Anthony Anderson), a successful executive at an advertising agency in Los Angeles. Happily married to Rainbow, a biracial doctor (Tracee Ellis Ross), and living with his five children and curmudgeonly father, Pops (Laurence Fishburne), *Black-ish* focuses on how Dre tries to establish a sense of cultural identity for his upper-middle-class black family in suburban California. When *Black-ish* premiered in late September 2014, it received a large amount of critical praise. Slate's Willa Paskin declared it the fall's "best new sitcom,"<sup>200</sup> and as Los Angeles Times critic Mary McNamara noted, the show has been widely greeted as a "game changer."<sup>201</sup> However, within the context of the post-racial, the rules of the game are no longer as clear as they might have once been.

In the show's pilot, Dre is expecting a promotion at work that will make him the first black senior vice president at his advertising firm.<sup>202</sup> Instead, he learns that he has been made senior vice president of the new 'Urban Division', a title that baffles him. "Wait, did they put me in charge of black stuff?" he wonders. Angry that professional recognition is contingent on his blackness rather than his capabilities, Dre's promotion also exacerbates existing anxieties about his family's racial identity. For example, Andre (Marcus Scribner), his oldest son, a freshman in high school, wants to go by Andy, play field hockey, and have a bar mitzvah. His youngest children refuse to describe people

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<sup>200</sup>Paskin, Willa. "Black-ish Is Smart, Politically Incorrect, and the Best New Sitcom of the Fall." *Slate Magazine*, 24 Sept. 2014, [www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2014/09/black-ish\\_review\\_abc\\_tv\\_show\\_about\\_black\\_family\\_is\\_the\\_best\\_new\\_sitcom\\_of.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2014/09/black-ish_review_abc_tv_show_about_black_family_is_the_best_new_sitcom_of.html).

<sup>201</sup> McNamara, Mary. "ABC's 'Black-ish' gamely takes on racial identity." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 24 Sept. 2014, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-blackish-review-20140924-column.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-blackish-review-20140924-column.html).

<sup>202</sup> Barris, Kenya, prod. "Pilot." *Black-ish*. ABC: 24 September 2014. DVD.

using racial signifiers and, in one of the episode's funniest exchanges, express confusion over identifying President Obama as black.

Rainbow: Obama's the first black president. I mean, does that make him any less president? No.

Dre: No, because he's the first black president of the United States, not the first black president of the Urban United States.

Jack: Obama's the first black president? What...

Dre: [groans] You're doing a bang-up job over here.

Rainbow: No, no, no. Hold on a second. Let's explore this. Jack, did you really not know that Obama was the first black president?

Jack: He's the only president I've ever known.<sup>203</sup>

Dre chafes at being racially profiled at work but also frets that the people he loves most are beginning to lose what he thinks of as their essential, innate blackness. He calls an emergency family gathering which culminates in him yelling, "I need my family to be black, not black-*ish*!"

The central conflict of *Black-ish* is therefore what it means to 'be black' without qualification. How does one maintain cultural identity in the face of peer pressure and minority status? What is black to an African American man living and working in predominantly white personal and professional settings? What is black to a mixed-raced woman, to black youths, to the audience?

*Black-ish* has provoked one thinkpiece after another for the way it puts blackness front and centre as a subject of consideration, yet the show does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, *Black-ish* fits within a rich history of black sitcoms that have sought to examine race in their own more or less successful ways. Robin R. Means Coleman divides black sitcoms into six categories, according to how they have dealt with race and representations of black people: television minstrelsy (1950–1953), nonrecognition

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<sup>203</sup> Barris, Kenya, prod. "Pilot." *Black-ish*. ABC: 24 September 2014. DVD.



(1954–1967), assimilationist (1968–1971), the [Norman] Lear era (1972–1983), the Cosby era (1984–1989), and neo-minstrelsy (1990–present).<sup>204</sup>

*Black-ish*'s style has its roots in the early 1970s with Lear's socially conscious black comedies which were confronting racial and economic issues for the first time and thriving. Race and class were dealt with head-on, but black Americans were also segregated from the white world. The downside, Coleman says, is that black Americans were viewed as segregated: "The unseen White world was implied to operate superiorly over a Black world which was marred by individuals' lack of achievement, trickery and dishonesty, and buffoonery."<sup>205</sup>

The success of these shows was largely due to their inward-looking commentary. Black people and the community were the target of their humour, with white audiences being only incidental casualties. *Black-ish* bucks this trend because its critical eye is trained squarely on the structural inequalities inherent in white supremacy. In doing so, the show has gained comparisons to *The Bernie Mac Show* (Fox, 2001–2006) and *Everybody Hates Chris* (UPN and The CW, 2005–2009) which explored the clichés of black success and failures effectively because they implicated whiteness. These shows had simultaneous conversations about race and class without conflating the two, yet in its nascent existence, this is what *Black-ish* seems to be struggling with. In trying to address both these issues in a primetime slot, the show is at a disadvantage from the jump. According to TV critic Pilot Virouet,

There is an inherent, unfair, and disheartening strike against a show like *Black-ish* (and not just its title) that is also representative of minorities in general: It has to work harder than your average sitcom just to be seen as good. It has to continue to prove itself. Modern Family can churn out ordinary, garden-variety episodes and win Emmys without breaking a sweat; *Black-ish* (and other similar, black-centric sitcoms like *Everybody Hates Chris* or *The Bernie Mac Show*) have to

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<sup>204</sup> Coleman, Robin R. Means. *African American viewers and the black situation comedy: Situating racial humor*. Taylor & Francis, 1998: p. 86.

<sup>205</sup> Coleman, 1998, p 88.

hustle and be on the top of their game with every single scene in order to just be considered.<sup>206</sup>

*Black-ish* is not the first black sitcom and it is aware of its predecessors. In attempting to be better than them, *Black-ish* tries to answer a particular question that arises around black popular culture: Is it possible to partake in the American Dream when individual and community relationships with America are permanently stained by a legacy of painful oppression?

As it follows Dre's path towards this dream, the show takes pains to ensure that every scene is slick-looking and meticulously manicured to make the Johnsons look like the ideal American family, with shots bathed in perfect southern California sunlight that conveys prosperity, success, wealth, and most importantly, belonging. Employing a voiceover similar to *Fresh Off the Boat*, which drives home the point of controlling one's own narrative, the show provides 'insider' commentary about everyday scenarios in which black and white Americans struggle through awkward interactions. Anderson and Fishburne, both producers on the show, are foils representing two different generations of the black male experience: Pops, a vet and civil rights protester, struggled to give his son the opportunities he never had, and Dre questions whether or not he had to sacrifice part of his cultural heritage in order to take advantage of those opportunities in the first place.

Dre begins the show aware of the subtle ways race and racism pose problems in his everyday life. He admits to feeling like an oddity in his affluent suburb, and resents dealing with mass cultural appropriation and being the only black executive at a predominantly white advertising agency, but he often chooses to ignore the compromises he is forced to make. Pops thinks his son should be working at a black company in order to "make an adjustment for the negro inflation tax," but Dre argues becoming the first black man to hold a high-ranking executive position at his ad agency is "about breaking down barriers." It is only when confronted with the effects of assimilation on his family's collective identity that Dre begins to question his acceptance of the status quo.

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<sup>206</sup> Viruet, Pilot. "Black-ish: TV Club, Tv.avclub.com, 15 Oct. 2014, [www.avclub.com/tvclub/Black-ish-crazy-mom-210550](http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/Black-ish-crazy-mom-210550).

The show grapples with existential threat of assimilation to a black identity, both individual collective, that has been forged in strife. The show does not attempt to say that suffering is a prerequisite of blackness, but the conspicuous absence of overt oppressions lends an element of suspicion to everyday experiences of comfort that whiteness takes for granted. A generation after upwardly mobile black Americans struggled for acceptance in white neighbourhoods and schools, black Americans now face with another problem: preserving a sense of identity inside the mainstream. Dre's introductory voiceover explains that he worries that in trying to "make it," black people have dropped elements of culture that have been grabbed up by white people. "They even renamed it 'urban,'" he says. "In the urban world, Justin Timberlake and Robin Thicke are R&B gods, Kim Kardashian's the symbol for big butts, and Asian guys are just unholdable on the dance floor." The way this assertive opening on the topic of appropriation lays bare the show's core concerns is fairly unheard of for a broadcast network comedy.

*Black-ish* squares off against the idea of black identity in a world in which black representation is often divorced from its historical meaning and detached from its cultural roots. However, despite playfully covering his bases with the show's tongue-in-cheek title that gestures towards the impossibility of definition, Barris still came under scrutiny for what some see as trying to put blackness in a box. Even before the first episode aired, the show was denounced as regressive for seeming "to raise questions that *The Cosby Show* trounced years ago, and without poking fun at the notion."<sup>207</sup> Hypervigilant labels such as octroon, quadroon, and mulatto no longer find favour in the mainstream, yet their legacy remains in the form of solid and bold racial lines surrounding what is and is not 'black', or 'black enough' for the black community. One of the hallmarks of the black experience in America is that it cannot be confined by a single definition and using "ish" as a suffix in the title hints at this truth. Still, the title also seems to imply that blackness itself has somehow transformed into an unrecognizable, amorphous thing that everyone, and therefore no one, can identify with or claim.

This splintering of blackness only intensifies the marginal space and the associated periphery feelings of being culturally mixed. Various forms of microaggressions convey a strong message to those straddling the line of black and

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<sup>207</sup> Houston, Shannon, et al. "Will the New ABC Sitcom '*Black-ish*' Work?" *Hollywood.com*, 27 May 2014, [www.hollywood.com/tv/will-abc-sitcom-blackish-be-successful-57380622/](http://www.hollywood.com/tv/will-abc-sitcom-blackish-be-successful-57380622/).

white society race that they are welcome in neither. What remains within the black community is that the authentic black experience has been guarded and only claimable by those who are believed to have lived and felt the full brunt of racialization in the United States. Identifying blackness in one's self and others then becomes more about shared-oppressed experiences and the gaze of the other begins to dictate social identities. The marginal space that black Americans are expected to operate in within a post-racial world can either expand or contract depending on whether definitions of identity are allowed to evolve.

*Black-ish* moves the fluctuating demands of professing blackness into an unsafe space, one where many become privy into the secret lives and minds of black people. Safety here refers to how 'real' or confrontational it is, forcing many to have to make the chronological jump through the history of blackness in America, or more simply, to change the channel to something less demanding. Assimilation has been a key theme in American comedy, with members of the older generation attempting to keep tradition alive even as they sacrifice to ensure their children's equality in the 'New World'. The naturally ensuing contradictions and tensions allow writers to address problems of past and present. However, the black experience is not one of easy assimilation into mainstream culture. Dre's children are children of privilege, and like most children, they do not understand what that privilege represents. Dre is caught in the contradiction felt by parents throughout the ages: They want a better life for their children, but not at the price of historical amnesia.

What sets *Black-ish* apart from its *Lear* and *Cosby* predecessors is Barris' recognition of that, and his refusal to dance around the complications of racial identity. *Black-ish* tries to make this middle ground both relatable and funny for the audiences who have to navigate that space every day. Despite Dre's occasional panic attack, *Black-ish* does not argue that there are specific behaviours that make someone "truly" black.<sup>208</sup> Over the course of the pilot, Dre is successfully convinced by his family – his wife, his children, and even his father – that he is overemphasizing certain signifiers of blackness, that he and his family are irrevocably black, no matter how much money they have or

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<sup>208</sup> One of the more interesting wrinkles in *Black-ish* is the way class issues play out within Dre's own family. He grew up in the "hood," but apparently Rainbow, with her hippie name, did not, and their kids, of course, are getting a prep-school upbringing.

how many bar mitzvahs they ask for. And yet, still, *Black-ish* is sympathetic to Dre, even as he dresses in a dashiki and throws chicken bones at his son. Dre's fear that he has somehow failed to pass a powerful, important sense of identity on to his children may be out of proportion, but the show respects his concern and does not belittle it.

When *Black-ish* succeeds, it is because it acknowledges that is about a specific upper-middle-class black experience, but it refuses to oversimplify the place that oversimplifications have in forming community relations. When Dre speaks with affection and no small pride about being the "big scary black guy,"; when he talks about O.J.'s innocence and his Pops's pretense that he was at the March on Washington; when he discusses fried chicken and basketball, it is simultaneously true that these things are pernicious stereotypes and also that they are signifiers of belonging. Dre takes pride in hoary and possibly even offensive generalizations – generalizations that only members of the group in question can make about themselves – because Barris wants to challenge the audience to admit that while these details do not mean everything, they are not insignificant either. Cultural identities comprise more than just clichés, but those clichés still signify.

The role a show like *Black-ish* plays in the post-racial landscape reveals itself most clearly when those clichés are wilfully misread by outsiders looking in. For example, in now-deleted a New York Post article with the headline "Shows like '*Black-ish*' perpetuate racist stereotypes," Andrea Peyser puts forward the idea that the show "promotes ugly racial bigotry."<sup>209</sup> Peyser seemingly ignores the fact that *Black-ish* is dedicated to openly discussing and complicating racist stereotypes, that the show promotes non-stereotypical black characters, and that the writers place racial issues at the forefront of many episodes in order to open a dialogue and introduce the larger, whiter world – the majority of television producers and audiences – to the intricacies and specifics of the black community.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> "'Black-Ish' Doesn't Perpetuate Racist Stereotypes; It Expertly Demolishes Them." *Flavorwire*, 6 Apr. 2015, [flavorwire.com/512835/black-ish-doesnt-perpetuate-racist-stereotypes-it-expertly-demolishes-them](http://flavorwire.com/512835/black-ish-doesnt-perpetuate-racist-stereotypes-it-expertly-demolishes-them).

<sup>210</sup> This article came on the heels of Deadline's misguided piece about "ethnics" on television. Andreeva, Nellie. "Pilots 2015: The Year Of Ethnic Castings." *Deadline*, 27 Mar. 2015, [deadline.com/2015/03/tv-pilots-ethnic-casting-trend-backlash-1201386511/](http://deadline.com/2015/03/tv-pilots-ethnic-casting-trend-backlash-1201386511/).

Peyser's argument is emblematic of white America's discomfort with having the confusing and distorting effects of racialization laid bare on television. In exploring racial bigotry, Peyser, a white woman, compares *Black-ish* to the short-lived Starbucks "Race Together" campaign, claiming that it "brings about the same kind of racial lunacy, making people of all skin colours appear biased, clueless and, most of all, racist." In identifying the black preoccupation with racial identity, Peyser neglects to point out that this preoccupation rings true largely because black people are always being reminded of their racial identity by those who are not a part of it. The phrase "*Black-ish*" does not refer to black characters who, as Peyser puts it, "are not black at all" – as though, once again, there is a specific way to be black – but rather about the filtered, privileged environment that Barris's (and fictional Dre's) children have in comparison to his own experiences growing up in Inglewood.

The term "black-ish" alone contradicts arguments about the show promoting racial stereotypes. It is a term actively troubling the shucking, jiving, or gang-banging stereotypes that television too-often delights in when shoving a black character into a network sitcom. The "black-ish" family on *Black-ish* are not stereotypes but instead well-rounded and singular – an advertising executive, a doctor, an awkward nerd, and a shallow popular girl are character traits that were once largely reserved for white characters. The "ethnic jokes" and stereotypes that are present in the show do not make black people the butt of the jokes; rather, the punchline is Johnson family's reaction to oblivious white biases, like Andre's offended response when his son's white friend comes to the Johnson home and expects the fridge to be full of grape soda.

One episode focuses on Andre Jr. joining the young Republicans — much to his parents' dismay.<sup>211</sup> In disbelief, they blurt out, "But we're black?!" Andre Jr. is chiefly concerned with impressing a pretty girl but then he begins to take to Republican politics. The writers have Dre and Rainbow disagree with Republican fundamentals without turning the episode into a full half-hour of easy conservative-baiting; a rival black couple extolls the virtues of being black Republicans while Dre marvels about how Cheney is a "hero" and a "pimp." If many of those who objected to the sitcom's name tended to couch their uneasiness in a wistful desire for the show to treat blackness as incidental, they

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<sup>211</sup> Barris, Kenya, prod. "Elephant in the Room." *Black-ish*. ABC: 13 May 2015. DVD.

were let down once it became clear that race – and class – would play a significant narrative role throughout the series.

In “Black Santa/White Christmas,” for instance, Dre sees the sudden death of his white colleague and the annual Santa impersonator at the company Christmas party as the perfect chance for him to gain holiday glory.<sup>212</sup> His mother Ruby disagrees (“Leave Santa to the white folks,” she says. “Let’s get a black James Bond first!”), but he encourages his boss to “think outside the box” when picking the next Santa. However, instead of choosing Dre, he chooses Dre’s co-worker Angelica Rodriguez, a Latina. “Too far from the box!” Dre laments. In another episode, Dre becomes upset about his oldest daughter Zoey’s (Yara Shahidi) white boyfriend (also named Andre).<sup>213</sup> When he expresses his concerns to his colleagues, Charlie (Deon Cole), tells him to loosen up: “Race don’t matter, ‘cause in 10 years, we’re all gonna look Puerto Rican.”

*Black-ish* often seeks to expand and contort its audience’s ideas about race and class, but the effectiveness with which it does that often varies wildly from episode to episode. It is key to keep in mind Barris’s view on the intersection of race and class. For him, “The socioeconomic classes in our country now, to me, are more divisive than race or culture.”<sup>214</sup> He sees this show as one with a class component – how wealth affects Dre’s self-concept – that is inseparable from its racial component.<sup>215</sup> Unlike the Huxtables of *The Cosby Show*, who were clearly well-off but only acknowledged it very rarely, the Johnsons discuss the affluence regularly and reflect on how it affects their children. While the racial politics of *Black-ish* are interesting, Dre’s mention of money is even more unusual for a network show. There is a candor about the way that having money, with its attendant assets and anxieties, affects Dre and Rainbow’s sense of who they are and how they are raising their kids.

Commenting on the way Dre’s sense of racial identity intersects with the introduction of wealth, former *Black-ish* producer Larry Wilmore has said,

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<sup>212</sup> Barris, Kenya, prod. “Black Santa/White Christmas.” *Black-ish*. ABC: 10 December 2015. DVD.

<sup>213</sup> Barris, Kenya, prod. “Andre from Marseilles.” *Black-ish*. ABC: 18 February 2015. DVD.

<sup>214</sup> Holmes, Linda. “*Black-ish* And The Colour Of Money.” *NPR*, NPR, 24 Sept. 2014, [www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2014/0a/24/351135398/Black-ish-and-the-colour-of-money](http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2014/0a/24/351135398/Black-ish-and-the-colour-of-money).

<sup>215</sup> “When brothers start getting a little money, stuff starts getting a little weird,” is one of the opening lines of the pilot.

Class is as much an issue, probably even more so now in some ways, for families that have 'arrived,' as you will, no matter what the culture is. Can be a more profound discussion than race and culture in some ways...When you talk about black privilege, that isn't something that people are always accustomed to seeing, especially in comedy.<sup>216</sup>

Indeed, Dre feels so conspicuous in his upscale neighbourhood that in the pilot he imagines himself being pointed out to a tour bus full of white people as the guide says over the loudspeaker that he and his “mythical and majestic black family” are “out of their natural habitat, and yet still thriving.” The absurdity of that visual gag does little to undercut the sharp edges of a joke about a widespread and condescending form of prejudice: the bestowing of specialness for not meeting other people's malicious expectations.

Questions about cultural belonging are inseparable from Dre's sense that he is giving his kids more materially than he had, and what appears to be a questioning on his part of whether being privileged in terms of material wealth is taking away some part of their racial identity. Yet there are, of course, certain experiences exclusive to blackness from which wealth cannot insulate a person. *Black-ish* addresses this most notably in its moving episode on police brutality. Airing in February 2016, the fictional Johnson family's private reckoning with this fact-of-life experience of blackness coincided with a larger national conversation about the fungibility of black bodies coloured by rage and mourning. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Barris reveals, “I have never been as afraid about an episode of television that I've written in my life.”<sup>217</sup>

Titled “Hope,”<sup>218</sup> the episode follows the family's reactions as they watch news coverage of a case involving a black teenager brutalised by the police in an unnamed city, the non-specificity of which contributes to the dark humour of an all-too-familiar story playing out on the national stage once again. Dre and Rainbow grapple with how to talk to their youngest children about the community reaction to the case and others like it.

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<sup>216</sup> Holmes, 2014

<sup>217</sup> Butler, Bethonie. “How ‘Blackish’ tackled police brutality while staying true to its roots.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 25 Feb. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/02/25/how-blackish-tackled-police-brutality-while-staying-true-to-its-roots/?utm\\_term=.3cee5749d147](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/02/25/how-blackish-tackled-police-brutality-while-staying-true-to-its-roots/?utm_term=.3cee5749d147).

<sup>218</sup> Barris, Kenya, prod. “Hope.” *Black-ish*. ABC: 24 February 2016. DVD.



Dre argues that they should tell the twins “the truth” and says “they’re not just children, they’re black children.” To this, Rainbow replies, “I’m not ready for them to think and see the world the way that you do.” Pops chimes in, with understandable bitterness, “I’m old enough to know when I’m hearing the same story told a different way. Police beating up on an unarmed black man. That’s a story I’ve been hearing all my life.”

The conversation gets more nuance from Andre Jr. and Zoey. In a conversation with his grandfather, Junior points out some of the facts of the case that Pops has ignored, and shares wisdom from his latest read, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*. Zoey’s initially tries to get out of watching the news with her family and seems more interested in texting her friends, but later confesses that she has been texting about the case and that feels “hopeless.” “Hope” subtly but movingly circles back to the show’s pilot, in which Dre worries that his children are forgetting their blackness: this time, when Junior resolves to join a protest and march against injustice, Andre suddenly worries that his son is now aware enough of his blackness to get himself killed.

### **Reading *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* in parallel**

In examining American culture, it makes little sense to talk about the ways in which minorities are represented without acknowledging the white supremacy and antiblackness at its root. Asian Americans are uniquely positioned to talk about this because that stereotype means they are used as leverage against other people of colour. From media portrayals to beauty standards to workplace representation to published commentary, there is a clear need to create necessary spaces for discussions about the Asian American experience. Chronic under representation of low quality has denied Asian Americans to whole identities. The choice to reject white inclusion in favour of the less defined alternative is a gamble on an uncertain national community.

Examining the different ways in which *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* address the complexities of being racialised is critical to understanding the criticism of non-black complicity in a power structure that disregards black life. This apathetic and restrained disregard has emerged as a significant theme in discussions of contemporary American life and culture. Underlying this turn seems to be the desire to expose the shortcomings

of what scholar Jared Sexton has called “people-of-colour-blindness,”<sup>219</sup> or the tendency to elide the experiences of all non-white people under one umbrella which obscures the specificities of black suffering. For example, arguing that police brutality is a major problem for all people of colour diminishes the fact that black Americans remain the primary and most disadvantaged targets of state violence. Popular culture therefore plays a necessary role in countering such appropriation by providing spaces for declarations that “our experiences are not the same”. In their successes and failures in accurately representing racialised existences, shows like *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* can intervene in too-simplistic readings of racism in America that collate the experiences of different racial groups.

However, while recent calls to question complicity have usefully highlighted the disparities in power and access to resources that exist between different minority groups in America, they often tend to function as inward-looking moral reprobation, rather than critical explanations for how such disparities came into being. For example, following the killing of twenty-five-year-old Freddie Gray by Baltimore police, Asian American poet Jason Chu released a short spoken-word video titled “They Won’t Shoot Me” in which he listed his economic and social comforts, concluding with the line “that’s privilege” as the text “I am not Freddie Gray” flashed across the screen.<sup>220</sup> The good intent behind Chu’s public display of privilege-checking was apparent, yet simultaneously raised questions about its solipsistic nature – is simply talking about one’s own life an effective rebuke of structural repression?

Recently inflamed by Asian political and cultural commentators like politician Bobby Jindal and author Amy Chua, the idea that Asians’ rigid cultural values have enabled them to bootstrap their way out of hardship has been in circulation at least since the end of World War II. Ellen D. Wu’s *The Colour of Success* identifies the roots of this insidious myth in the post-war rise of racial liberalism as the dominant framework for addressing matters of race in America.<sup>221</sup> The United States’ struggle for global ascendancy after World War II and through the Cold War prompted the liberal argument

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<sup>219</sup> Sexton, Jared. “People-of-colour-blindness notes on the afterlife of slavery.” *Social Text* 28.2 103 (2010): 31-56.

<sup>220</sup> Jasonchumusic. “Jasonchumusic.” *Fear is Easy. Hope is Real.*, 29 Apr. 2015, [blog.jasonchumusic.com/post/117712785734/they-wont-shoot-me-i-am-not-freddie-gray-a](http://blog.jasonchumusic.com/post/117712785734/they-wont-shoot-me-i-am-not-freddie-gray-a).

<sup>221</sup> Wu, Ellen D. *The Colour of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. Princeton University Press, 2013: p. 155.

that Asian Americans should be subjected to fewer racial restrictions in order to improve ties with Asian nations while simultaneously providing a model for the kind of egalitarian democracy America claimed to promote overseas.

Groups like the Japanese American Citizens League pressed for positive representations of Asians by releasing texts that extolled the virtues of Asian culture and recruiting ‘respectable’ spokespeople to serve as race ambassadors. The Moynihan Report, for instance, credited the “close-knit family structure” of the Japanese and Chinese with their uplift in society, and juxtaposed this with “black matriarchy,” arguing that the latter had been responsible for black poverty<sup>222</sup> thus providing crude justification for antiblack racism. The propagation of revisionist narratives also made it possible for Americans to dismiss the cruelties of internment and Chinese Exclusion policies. Wu writes, “Japanese American ‘success stories’ of the mid- to late 1950s redeemed the nation’s missteps and reinforced liberalism’s tenets, especially state management of the racial order.”<sup>223</sup> The overlapping interests of the government and liberal advocacy groups to incorporate Asian Americans into the body politic created the false narrative of immigrant success that became the model minority myth which is recreated in contemporary culture today.

Discussing the material advantages of certain Asian American groups today as a form of ‘privilege’ or ‘complicity’ with power rather than the result of a specific set of immigration and domestic policies that have aligned with shifting national attitudes only obscures the mechanisms of capitalism where clarification is needed. To understand the position occupied by Asian Americans in the current hierarchy of power, it is more useful to consider which cultural structures have enabled certain Asian American communities to flourish economically, and to question the instances in which has this occurred at the expense of other ethnic and racial groups.

Sociologist Jennifer Lee argues that the Asian immigrants who enter the US are “highly selected, meaning that they are more highly educated than their ethnic

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<sup>222</sup> Geary, Daniel. “The Moynihan Report: An Annotated Edition.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 14 Sept. 2015, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/).

<sup>223</sup> Wu, 2013, p. 160. Wu’s book is notable in that it foregrounds the specific ways in which Asian groups actively participated in the construction of the model minority mythology. However, Wu is also careful to note that “model minority status was, for the most part an unintended consequence that sprung from many concurrent imperatives in American life.”

counterparts who did not immigrate.”<sup>224</sup> Asian Americans may currently hold the highest median income and education levels of any race today<sup>225</sup> but to interpret this data solely as evidence that racial superiority is the cause of this success or that white supremacy has extended its spoils to Asian communities is to engage in the elision of race and class. This practice misunderstands how the particular racialization of Asians in America augments a neo-liberal restructuring of capitalism that demands increasing numbers of both knowledge workers and service workers while also attempting to lowering wages across the board.<sup>226</sup>

What *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Blackish* do is highlight the complicated ways race is leveraged through the idea of a hierarchical minoritisation which constructs Asian Americans as not-white even as it positions the group on the advantaged end of people of colour. What is becoming apparent is not that Asians are being assimilated into whiteness but rather that they are being assimilated into an evolving formulation of ‘not black’-ness. Much of the discussion about Asian Americans and diversity never moves beyond the “Asians are being left out of the conversation!” point without recognizing that they are “left out” because they do not face the same particular forms of racism. It could be read as disingenuous to claim to be “left out” of the black/white framing, and then conveniently ignore the ways Asian Americans benefit from not being seen as black. While campaigns like #Asians4BlackLives and #ModelMinorityMutiny ostensibly extend a hand of solidarity to other racial groups, they also run the risk of falling into a “good ally” model where the focus becomes diverted from the cause they support back onto themselves. Such campaigns may also implicitly suggest that those not organizing under their specific banners are automatically opposed to the struggle for racial justice when in

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<sup>224</sup> Magazine, Contexts. “Fifty Years of “New” Immigration.” *Fifty Years of “New” Immigration - Contexts*, [contexts.org/articles/fifty-years-of-new-immigration/#lee](https://contexts.org/articles/fifty-years-of-new-immigration/#lee).

<sup>225</sup> The Federal Reserve of St. Louis projects Asian American wealth to overtake that of whites within two decades. “Asian Americans Set to Surpass Whites in Median Family Wealth.” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, [www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/Asian-Americans-set-surpass-whites-median-family-wealth-n314341](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/Asian-Americans-set-surpass-whites-median-family-wealth-n314341).

<sup>226</sup> A 2014 report by Asian Americans Advancing Justice LA found that Asians were overrepresented not just in STEM fields, but also in “personal care and service occupations,” including nail salons, garment production, and taxi and livery drivers. That these roles sound like stereotypes indicates how business continues to use powerful racist stereotypes to segment and exploit workers and how sweeping categories like “Asian” hide deep class divisions. “2014 Annual Report.” *2014 Annual Report | Asian Americans Advancing Justice - LA*, [www.advancingjustice-la.org/media-and-publications/publications/2014-annual-report](https://www.advancingjustice-la.org/media-and-publications/publications/2014-annual-report).

reality, adequate information on the issue is often inaccessible to many outside the bubble.

The decades-long struggle to control the Asian American image cannot move further without addressing the necessary politics of deconstructing an economic system that exploits its working participants. It begins with the disconcerting recognition that the boundaries of whiteness can shift and that race is not determinate. However, the historical expansion of whiteness has assumed as one of its necessary components immigrants' eventual expected desire for a white identity. However, there is scant evidence that Asian Americans across generations desire to blend in with whiteness or unhyphenated Americanness.<sup>227</sup> Contemporary Asian American groups often centre their activism around the retention of their ethnonational identity, a movement encouraged by America's present era of multiculturalism which recognises and hegemonically celebrates difference. Yet, because they are often welcomed into the fray as antiblack leverage, the cost of this 'in between'-ness is becoming hard to measure. The passive acceptance of the privileges of whiteness renders Asian Americans complicit in America's present system of hierarchy which inflicts ongoing injustices on a racialised underclass. Silence and inaction on the part of those receiving privilege only makes it harder for those on the lower tiers of social 'value' to meaningfully affect the status quo.

Asian and black Americans have been played off of one another, respectively, as 'harder working than blacks' and 'more American than Asians'.<sup>228</sup> In the contemporary United States, it matters that white America ideologically valorises Asian ethnicities above black bodies in the colour order and sustains a system that racialises Asian and black Americans vis-à-vis one another not only to ensure an internecine minority conflict but to legitimize the existence of American meritocracy.<sup>229</sup> Part of the answer lies in redefining the acceptable perimeters of voice and representation in larger culture.

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<sup>227</sup> Le Espiritu, Yen. *Home bound: Filipino American lives across cultures, communities, and countries*. Univ of California Press, 2003; Kibria, Nazli. "Of blood, belonging, and homeland trips: transnationalism and identity among second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans." *The changing face of home: The transnational lives of the second generation* (2002): 295-311; Rudrappa, Sharmila. *Ethnic routes to becoming American: Indian immigrants and the cultures of citizenship*. Rutgers University Press, 2004.

<sup>228</sup> Almaguer, Tomas. *Racial fault lines: The historical origins of white supremacy in California*. Univ of California Press, 2008: p 36.

<sup>229</sup> If the system can stereotype all Asian Americans as model minorities, then black Americans have only themselves to blame. This point is also crucial insofar as it shows that Asian Americans have been valorised for their success as a racial minority group, not as part of the white majority.

Tripartite models of race like the one suggested by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva are a useful starting point, but there is a need for a greater investigation into and action upon the discrete yet intertwined specificities of Asian American and black racialization – to take seriously the wide spectrum of denial of social citizenship to minority groups on a racial basis and to capture how it is linked to antiblack subordination and the racial system writ large.

## Chapter Four: *Master of None* and *Dr. Ken*

In the introductory essay to an expanded edition of the seminal literary collection *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* titled *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, Chinese American playwright, author, and photographer Frank Chin penned a sharply worded missive against 'inauthenticity' spurred primarily by the work of fellow Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *The Woman Warrior*. Under the title 'Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake' Chin writes:

What seems to hold Asian American literature together is the popularity among whites of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (450,000 copies sold since 1976); David Henry Hwang's *F.O.B.* (Obie, best off- Broadway play) and *M. Butterfly* (Tony, best Broadway play); and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. These works are held up before us as icons of our pride, symbols of our freedom from the icky-gooey evil of . . . Chinese culture.<sup>230</sup>

Responding to this criticism, Kingston noted in her 1982 "Cultural Misreadings" essay that *The Woman Warrior*, an autobiography/memoir of her life, was seldom given recognition for the quality of its writing alone.<sup>231</sup> Instead, Kingston writes, her work became a convenient backdrop against which already-established conceptions of Chinese Americans played out. The author's invocation of form here allows readers to posit that Kingston herself sees the form of self-narrative as restrictive and is a factor equally important as any other in strategizing the address to Asian American stereotypes. The question thus becomes how the marginal author might mobilize tropes that would resist recuperation by or into normative notions of ethnic identity. This is of a piece with Chin's argument that ethnic identity must always be procedural rather than finite, which reflects his awareness of America's historical ability to assimilate opposition and the need for a cultural critique that is always in motion.

Continuing this argument on form and applying it to the medium of television, it is useful to bring in George Lipsitz on race and space, "the lived experience of race has a

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<sup>230</sup> Chin, Frank. "Come all ye Asian American writers of the real and the fake." *A companion to Asian American studies* (1990): 133-156.

<sup>231</sup> Kingston, Maxine Hong. "Cultural mis-readings by American reviewers." *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1982. 55-65.

spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension."<sup>232</sup> The sites of living, learning, and working; where people produce and consume; where they organize and forge connections: all of these are structured by race. The spatialization of race regulates access to state resources, from health care to education to voting, as well as social capital, all of which have been intensified under the neoliberal restructuring of space and the state. Such dispensations build upon the spatialization of race as a 'world problem' (Du Bois 1903), and Western European concepts of modernity continue to intertwine distance with difference to produce 'imagined geographies' (Said 1978) that have imbued relative location with hierarchies of racial meaning and value.

Chin's public diatribe found as many supporters as it did opponents on either side, drawing into the spotlight the ongoing controversy wielded by the double-edged sword of cultural authenticity. Although Chin's anger and the various reactions to it were addressed to the literary world, the ripples of its named frustrations can be traced beyond the bounds of literature and to the popular culture concerns of this thesis. Defining authenticity is culturally and politically complex, especially considering the difficulty in tracing the dynamic history of peoples and cultures. The failure of the present discourse around minority representation in the media lies in its approach to authenticity: as aspirational, as objectively good, or, I would argue, even as possible. As this thesis suggests, the pursuit of cultural authenticity is fraught with a fundamental irony as attempts to adhere to an original state end up being limiting or reductive as representations premised on the notion of 'ought' are inherently self-defeating.

According to cultural critic Jonathan Rossing, the post-racial "thwarts the articulation of a successful politics of race and disallows movement toward racial justice because it impedes discourse about race."<sup>233</sup> In this chapter, I examine the work of Aziz Ansari and Ken Jeong, two creatives of colour whose works deal with authenticity as a challenge to individual identity, and who use the visual space offered by television to confront authentic representations of what non-white identities "ought" to be.

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<sup>232</sup> Lipsitz, George. "The racialization of space and the spatialization of race theorizing the hidden architecture of landscape." *Landscape Journal* 26.1 (2007): 10-23 (p. 12).

<sup>233</sup> Rossing, Jonathan P. "Deconstructing postracialism: Humor as a critical, cultural project." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 36.1 (2012): 44-61 (p. 45).



In his essay on the crisis of authenticity in contemporary African American literature, Richard Schur says that “blackness, when framed in the terms of authenticity, creates a fiction around racial identity and experience and elides how race, in fact, operates.”<sup>234</sup> Schur’s criticism here, that authenticity is a fictional construct that omits the real-world operations of race, suggests the need to eliminate the quotations around the word authentic and accept it as always ironic. Authenticity is not, in fact, a true or definitive view of a life; it is the embodiment of a fictionalised representation of how certain identities should be.

As Gene Andrew Jarrett describes authenticity, “texts are ‘authentic’ when their authors are identifiable as African American, regardless of whether these authors desire to be characterised this way.”<sup>235</sup> Applying this description to Ansari and Jeong, it becomes apparent that they are not pioneers in their exploration of authenticity, but it is their mapping out of the ramifications of cultural authenticity in the supposedly postracial world that puts them on common ground. This chapter will focus mainly on *Master of None* as it is lauded as a archetypal post-racial product and it is necessary to dissect what that means, but I will also draw in comparisons of the show *Dr. Ken* as a parallel example of how post-raciality and authenticity can merge or come in conflict with one another.

### **Post-raciality on *Master of None* and *Dr. Ken***

In the pilot episode of Indian American comedian Aziz Ansari's Netflix show, *Master of None*, the main character, Dev (played by Ansari), brings the two young children of a friend to a frozen yoghurt store. As they enter and make their way to the counter, the children take vocal note of the other customers, and yell out descriptors: “Black lady! Chinese man!” Dev quickly interjects and gently admonishes them, “Hey, hey! Don't yell out people's ethnicities.”<sup>236</sup>

Ansari's inclusion of this scene at the start of the series is notable for what it reveals of the show's perception of itself. It unambiguously sets the tone for the series' ethos that race is unremarkable; that those who comment on race so obviously are acting

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<sup>234</sup> Schur, Richard. “The Crisis of Authenticity in Contemporary African American Literature.” *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon* (2013): 235-54 (p. 235).

<sup>235</sup> Jarrett, Gene Andrew. Introduction. *African American Literature Beyond Race*. Ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett. New York: NYU Press, 2006: p.2.

<sup>236</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. “Plan B.” *Master of None*. Netflix: 6 November 2015. Netflix.

within a reactionary framework and must be reminded as such. More subtly, by distancing itself from clumsy commentary of this sort, it also works to establish *Master of None's* particular iteration of the post-racial, one that acknowledges race with a studied indifference.

In Korean American comedian Ken Jeong's ABC television debut, *Dr. Ken*, during a discussion about parenting, the titular character (played by Jeong) rebuts his wife Allison's statement that children need freedom thusly: "Kids don't need freedom. They need - what's the opposite of freedom - duct tape! They need to be taped down." Allison exclaims, "Oh my God! You sound like your father." Ken immediately responds with a loud and exaggerated (and seemingly practiced) impression of his father speaking Korean, translating for his wife in broken English, "Tape down child cannot run!"<sup>237</sup>

This clip appeared in promos for the show before its premiere, and for most, it heralded an inauspicious beginning to what they had hoped would be another feather in the cap of Asian American cultural contributions by one of the community's most recognizable faces. Not only did it fulfil the trope of overprotective and controlling Asian parent, it also appeared to cater to the familiar desire of the white gaze to view 'Asianness' in an American context in ways jarring, inherently mockable, and always-foreign.

The apparent contradiction between the historical legal rejection of Asian Americans and the community's continued cultural desirability can be understood through Robert Lee's distinction between the "alien" and the "foreign". While both terms denote otherness, the foreign is an object benignly temporary, while the alien poses an undeniable threat as a permanent pollutant. Thus, although the 'foreign' still serves to bar outsiders from cultural assimilation, foreignness can nevertheless be fetishised and even admired because it is not dangerous.<sup>238</sup>

However, on *Dr. Ken*, the cringe-inducing audio-visual of a(n often generic) 'Asian American' accent being offered up laughable content is complicated by the specificity of its incidence: It takes place on a sitcom about an Asian American family, is performed by an actual Korean American speaking actual Korean, and the target of his mimicry is his own father, a likely not-uncommon occurrence in many immigrant families. What does it

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<sup>237</sup> Jeong, Ken, prod. "Pilot." *Dr. Ken*. ABC: 2 October 2015. DVD.

<sup>238</sup> Lee, Robert G. *Orientalism: Asian Americans in popular culture*. Temple University Press, 1999: p. 3.

mean to charge an Asian American man in creative control of his own television show with yellowface?

*Master of None* and *Dr. Ken*, two shows markedly different in content, form, and critical acclaim, offer two distinct ways of considering and problematizing the current template for post-racial rationality. Each show interprets the idea of 'post' differently: *Master of None* is intent on moving past the moment of race, while *Dr. Ken* announces itself immediately and decisively as a primetime intruder. *Master of None* looks at it as a chance to fold discussions of race into the everyday, allowing its characters to pick up and put down these considerations as and when is convenient but refusing to accord race the power of a mobilizing force in daily interactions between its characters. Whereas *Dr. Ken*, in its purposeful disentanglement from explicit racial acknowledgement and simultaneous distancing of/clinging to familiar cultural markers, forces the viewer to note the irony in its portrayal of Asian Americans and to consider the implications of its anarchic embrace of loaded racial depictions.

Both *Master of None* and *Dr. Ken* benefit from being 'not-the-first'. In following their recent televisual predecessors<sup>239</sup>, *The Mindy Project* and *Fresh Off the Boat* respectively, there are unavoidable questions surrounding historical specificity and engagement with cultural legacies that must be confronted - or so the post-racial script would make it seem.

In adhering to this narrative of introspection laid bare for public consumption, *Master of None* has been lauded for its awareness - but what does that mean? Awareness is often deployed as a necessary/pre-assumed condition for cultural products originating from minorities. Before people of colour are allowed to participate in the cultural conversation, they must demonstrate an awareness of their own precarious positions. On the other hand, *Dr. Ken*, dismissed by critics for "its relentless dalliance with lazy stereotypes"<sup>240</sup>, flouts the conventions of a mindful foray into racial visualization through

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<sup>239</sup> I do not argue that simply because two shows star Indian Americans or Taiwanese or Korean Americans, they should be compared, given the significantly different subject matter. However, the question of television heritage invariably arises in reviews, recaps, interviews, and public discussions, and to ignore the significance of such comparisons made would be against the interests of this thesis.

<sup>240</sup> Crupi, Anthony. "Why Your Favorite Poorly Rated Show Will Live to Fight Another Day." *Vulture*, 3 Dec. 2015, [www.vulture.com/2015/12/why-these-poorly-rated-shows-will-stay-alive.html](http://www.vulture.com/2015/12/why-these-poorly-rated-shows-will-stay-alive.html).

its insistence on re-enacting Asian stereotypes as a way of engaging with the troubling images that already exist in the representational ether.

Here, it is useful to consider LeiLani Nishime's approach to media analyses of Asian American images. Nishime argues that these analyses should not be simply categorised as stereotypical vs. oppositional or celebrated vs. condemned; rather, it is more productive to read the visibility and invisibility of bodies in the media for what they reflect about the continued significance of power-laden systems of value.<sup>241</sup>

*Master of None* appears to be the perfect post-racial product, but it is possible to read its peripheral yet returning focus on identity politics as coming at the expense of ignoring other contexts that contribute to the creation of an updated model minority myth. This new myth relegates the struggle of cultural assimilation to the immigrant experience and exchanges it for first-generation anxieties over performance as the good economic subject.

In *The Well-Tempered Self: Citizenship, Culture and the Post-Modern Self*, Toby Miller writes that media and other forms of popular culture serve to discipline the individual and to temper the behaviours of citizens and consumers. [1993] As neoliberal media culture expands, the focus on the individual shapes citizenship as something that each person must attain for his or her self - through private enterprise, media consumption and interpretation choices, performances of participation, or other individual acts.

In an interview that appears in the January 2016 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, Jeong speaks about his intentional avoidance of 'Asian American storylines':

**Jeong:** Right now, my son is injured on this show, but we're not making any Asian jokes about it.

**Interviewer:** How *could* you make that into an Asian joke?

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<sup>241</sup> Nishime, LeiLani. *Undercover Asian: multiracial Asian Americans in visual culture*. University of Illinois Press, 2014.

**Jeong:** Oh, wow, he really sprained his Asian--American ankle. Quick, get the Asian--American Ace wrap — make sure it's Korean.<sup>242</sup>

Jeong's desire to 'normalize' the Asian American experience recalls Renato Rosaldo's work on minority groups in Southeast Asia and Latinos in the United States. Rosaldo points out that "when one enjoys the status of belonging to the national community, this belonging can easily be taken for granted and trivialised; but when such belonging is denied, its absence can prove devastating."<sup>243</sup>

In the past few years, that denial of recognition for Asian Americans has expanded to an outright 'racial hijacking' in popular culture. Robert Luketic's movie *21* (2008) was inspired by the true story of the MIT Blackjack Team, a group of students and ex-students from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard Business School, Harvard University, and other leading colleges who used card counting techniques and other strategies to beat casinos at blackjack worldwide. The team and its successors operated successfully from 1979 to the early 2000s. Ben Mezrich captured their story in his book *Bringing Down the House* (2003), which included the fact that the majority of the players on the team were Asian American. However, the lead in the movie was played by Jim Sturgess, a white British actor, and featured only two Asian Americans (Aaron Yoo and Liza Lapira) in minor supporting roles.

M. Night Shyamalan's 2010 fantasy adventure *The Last Airbender*, based on the popular Nickelodeon animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, came under fire for its significant warping of the show's Asian and Inuit influences. Mike Le, a writer for Racebending.com, a site described as "an international grassroots organization of media consumers who support entertainment equality", said, "To take this incredibly loved children's series, and really distort not only the ethnicity of the individual characters but the message of acceptance and cultural diversity that the original series advocated, is a huge blow."<sup>244</sup> As a result of the casting, the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) urged a film boycott for the first time in the organization's 18-year history. Guy

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<sup>242</sup> Cox, Ana Marie. "Ken Jeong Is Not Cracking Asian Jokes." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 31 Dec. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/magazine/ken-jeong-is-not-cracking-asian-jokes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/magazine/ken-jeong-is-not-cracking-asian-jokes.html?_r=0).

<sup>243</sup> Rosaldo, Renato. *Cultural citizenship in island Southeast Asia: Nation and belonging in the hinterlands*. Univ of California Press, 2003: p. 2.

<sup>244</sup> Hajela, Deepti. "Critics: 'Airbender,' 'Prince' were 'whitewashed'." *TODAY.com*, 25 May 2010, [www.today.com/id/37336714#.VzSJ4vmDGko](http://www.today.com/id/37336714#.VzSJ4vmDGko).

Aoki, the organization's president, stated, "This was a great opportunity to create new Asian American stars...I'm disappointed."<sup>245</sup>

More recently, Ridley Scott's 2015 film *The Martian*, based on Andy Weir's 2011 science fiction book of the same name, came under scrutiny for its substitution of a Korean American character, Mindy Park, and an Indian American character, Dr. Venkat Kapoor, with a white woman (played by Mackenzie Davis) and a black man (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) respectively.<sup>246</sup> In an open letter, Aoki wrote,

Was Ridley Scott not comfortable having two sets of Asian Americans talking to each other? So few projects are written specifically with Asian American characters in them and he's now changed them to a white woman and black man. This was a great opportunity to give meaty roles to talented Asian American actors – and boost their careers – which would've enabled our community to become a greater part of the rescue team.<sup>247</sup>

Another 2015 film, Cameron Crowe's *Aloha* was also met with derision when it was revealed that Caucasian actress Emma Stone's character, Allison Ng, was meant to be partially of Chinese American heritage. When asked about the role, Stone echoed director Crowe's own defence that he based the character on a real-life woman he met whose Asian heritage was not immediately apparent: "The character was not supposed to look like her background, which was a quarter Hawaiian and a quarter Chinese."<sup>248</sup>

This unsettling trend looks on track to continue in 2016 with the controversies surrounding upcoming movies *Ghost in the Shell* and *Doctor Strange*. *Ghost in the Shell*, based on a hugely popular anime by the same name, sees white actress Scarlett Johansson in the role of Major Motoko Kusanagi. In a series of tweets contextualizing the creative history of *Ghost in the Shell*, Japanese American comic author Jon Tsuei lays out an

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<sup>245</sup> Aucoin, Don. "'Last Airbender' opens debate on race." *Boston.com*, The Boston Globe, 4 July 2010, [archive.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2010/07/04/last\\_airbender\\_opens\\_debate\\_on\\_race/?page=full](http://archive.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2010/07/04/last_airbender_opens_debate_on_race/?page=full).

<sup>246</sup> In the book, Kapoor, NASA's director of Mars operations, identifies religiously as being "a Hindu." In Scott's adaptation, his name is changed to Vincent Kapoor, and his character says his father was "a Hindu" and that his mother was "Baptist". Weir, Andy. *The Martian*. Del Rey, 2014.

<sup>247</sup> Lee, Benjamin. "Ridley Scott accused of 'whitewashing' Asian roles in *The Martian*." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 Oct. 2015, [www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/09/the-martian-ridley-scott-accused-whitewashing-asian-roles](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/09/the-martian-ridley-scott-accused-whitewashing-asian-roles).

<sup>248</sup> Robinson, Joanna. "Emma Stone Says Her 'Eyes Have Been Opened' by *Aloha* Controversy." *HWD*, Vanity Fair, 16 July 2015, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/07/emma-stone-responds-aloha-whitewashing](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/07/emma-stone-responds-aloha-whitewashing).

argument for the inherent problems in telling Asian stories from an American perspective:

[In the late 1980s/early 1990s] Japan was setting a standard... They poured their resources into their economy. And as a country that was unable to defend themselves, but was a world leader in tech, it created a relationship to tech that is unique. *Ghost in the Shell* plays off all of these themes. It is inherently a Japanese story, not a universal one. This casting is not only the erasure of Asian faces but a removal of the story from its core themes. You can “Westernize” the story if you want, but at that point it is no longer *Ghost in The Shell* because the story is simply not Western. Understand that media from Asia holds a dear place in the hearts of many Asians in the west, simply because Western media doesn't show us.<sup>249</sup>

In a piece for *The Verge*, Emily Yoshida examines the different reactions to the movie's whitewashing between the anime's Japanese fans, for whom the concept of whitewashing is a 'foreign' one, and Japanese Americans, who view this particular battle as a continuation in a long history of struggle:

[Japanese Americans] grew up forced to think about identity in a much more tactile way. For us, anime is something from our country, or our parents' country, that was cool enough for white kids to get into just as fervently. We couldn't see ourselves in Hollywood's shows and movies, but we could claim anime as our own, and see ourselves in its wild sci-fi imaginings and cathartic transformation sequences.<sup>250</sup>

In *Doctor Strange*, the upset has come from Marvel's casting of white actress Tilda Swinton in the role of The Ancient One, a character who is Asian and male in the comics. Essentially a variation on the “Magical Asian” archetype, The Ancient One is a wise and enigmatic mentor who trains arrogant surgeon-turned-sorcerer Stephen Strange in the mystical arts. Changing the character into a white person - as well as switching the character's gender - in the film appears to be Marvel's attempt at ridding *Doctor Strange*

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<sup>249</sup> Tsuei, Jon (jontsuei). “Ok, I have some thoughts. Bear with me if you would.” 14 April 2016, 7.38 p.m. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/jontsuei/status/720804231158964224>

<sup>250</sup> Yoshida, Emily. “*Ghost in the Shell* and anime's troubled history with representation.” *The Verge*, 9 May 2016, [www.theverge.com/2016/5/9/11612530/ghost-in-the-shell-anime-asian-representation-hollywood](http://www.theverge.com/2016/5/9/11612530/ghost-in-the-shell-anime-asian-representation-hollywood).

of its off-putting Orientalism.<sup>251</sup> However, based on the trailer (*Doctor Strange* is scheduled for release in November 2016), the film still appears to be heavily Asian-influenced. The characters visit 'exotic' locations full of Asian people and architecture and neon signs in Chinese text, train in rooms that look like martial arts dojos, and wear robes reminiscent of martial arts uniforms. The difference now is that Asians themselves appear to have been erased from the narrative.

This ongoing erasure of Asians from American stories spurred the Twitter hashtag #whitewashedOUT which gathers discussions by Asian Americans with regards to the lack of diversity in Hollywood. Contributing to the conversation, Chinese American young adult author Marie Lu wrote, "when [sic] I actually struggle with: if I write myself, will I end my career? If I \*don't\* write myself, will I be a traitor?"<sup>252</sup> Lu's sentiment illustrates the complexities, particularly surrounding the question of authenticity, faced by creatives of colour who feel that they must shoulder the burden of correcting the failures of whitewashing.

In May 2016, William Yu, a 25-year-old digital strategist, launched a project titled #StarringJohnCho. For the project, Yu modified posters for movies like *The Martian*, *Spectre*, *London Has Fallen*, and others featuring white male leads to show what they would have looked like if they had instead starred Korean American actor John Cho. On his website, Yu has paired his artwork with a slew of educational materials, including facts about Asian Americans in Hollywood, links to stories that further illuminate the issue and the aforementioned hashtag that people can use to share their thoughts on social media. In explaining his undertaking, Yu says, "I hope that people visit the site and realize that being a charismatic protagonist, a romantic interest, or an action star is not race specific."<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Most recently, Marvel has claimed that "The Ancient One is a title that is not exclusively held by any one character, but rather a moniker passed down through time, and in this particular film the embodiment is Celtic." Rosenberg, Adam. "Marvel defends 'Doctor Strange' casting with new character info." *Mashable*, Mashable, 26 Apr. 2016, mashable.com/2016/04/26/doctor-strange-ancient-one-celtic/#zGbkbsq.0Sqx.

<sup>252</sup> Lu, Marie (Marie\_Lu). "#whitewashedOUT when I actually struggle with: if I write myself, will I end my career? If I \*don't\* write myself, will I be a traitor?" 3 May 2016, 10.05 a.m. Tweet. [https://twitter.com/Marie\\_Lu/status/727544522893185024](https://twitter.com/Marie_Lu/status/727544522893185024)

<sup>253</sup> Rice, Zak Cheney. "This Website Might Have Just Solved Hollywood's Diversity Problem." *Mic*, Mic Network Inc., 6 May 2016, mic.com/articles/142858/starring-john-cho-website-just-found-the-answer-to-hollywood-s-diversity-problem#.l00Imf4IQ.



Yu's project raises an interesting question about the usefulness of what can be termed 'flat visibility' or, literally here, 'racial placement'. It is indeed a significant thing to see someone like John Cho as an action star or a romantic lead, but is Yu in fact saying that inserting an Asian American in a major role would require no nuanced changes to a given script - that it would be easy for a non-white actor to step seamlessly into a white role (transforming a 'person of colour' merely into an easily substitutable 'body of colour')? How does this tie into Asian proximity to whiteness/non-blackness? What does this say about how familiar people are with what it takes to pass as white, or how inextricably linked normalcy/normative tropes are to whiteness? A role might not be race-specific in the sense that a character, as a concept, can be taken in many directions. But is that the same thing as writing a character with a white actor in mind and simply substituting an Asian one instead? In what ways can Asian actors disrupt white narratives, and force viewers to reconsider their own complicity in reifying white hegemony?

In accepting that 'racial placement' is a useful and/or necessary step in fulfilling the potential of a post-racial moment, it can be argued that this approach serves to uphold the simplified idea that race is 'merely' a social construct. As Eric K. Watts summarises,

Treating "race" as merely a social construction misses a crucial facet of its nature; the power of tropes of race...[that are] coded into the institutions we inhabit and the social relations regulated by them. ...Saying that "race" is a "fiction" does very little to disable its vigorous affects. ...The trope of the "postracial" enunciates the "demise" of "race"; meanwhile...strategist capture and redeploy the haunting and ravenous effects of "race."<sup>254</sup>

It is at the intersection of 'authenticity' and 'specificity' that the anxieties/tensions in reading *Master of None* and *Dr. Ken* begin to reveal themselves. Much has been made of the expectations placed upon *The Mindy Project* and *Fresh Off the Boat* as the first shows of their kind - that is, starring Asian Americans - in the post-racial age. However, while there is no denying the burden shouldered by those blazing the trail, it is productive to consider the unique position of relative freedom held by the ones that follow.

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<sup>254</sup> Watts, Eric King. "The (nearly) apocalyptic politics of "postracial" America: Or "This is now the United States of Zombieland."." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34.3 (2010): 214-222.

## ***Master of None, Dr. Ken and authenticity***

Mindy Kaling's response to repeated demands to qualify her position as an Indian woman - often at the expense of recognition of her role as showrunner - has been well-documented in a previous chapter of this thesis.<sup>255</sup> In comparison, Ansari often initiates discussions about race in interviews for *Master of None*, welcoming conversations about his and his character's experiences as a minority in America in a way that Kaling intentionally avoids both on screen and in real life. On the same day that Ansari appeared on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, joking that his presence marked an "all-time high for CBS" in terms of diversity, the *New York Times* published an op-ed that he had written about homogeneity on television and in movies.

Even though I've sold out Madison Square Garden as a standup comedian and have appeared in several films and a TV series, when my phone rings, the roles I'm offered are often defined by ethnicity and often require accents. Sure, things are moving in the right direction with *Empire* and *Fresh Off the Boat*. But, as far as I know, black people and Asian people were around before the last TV season.<sup>256</sup>

The ease with which Ansari definitively inserts himself into the racial conversation diverges sharply from Kaling's reticence around labels. It is possible - necessary, even - to attribute part of this disparity to the gendered expectations of intellectual discourse.<sup>257</sup> However, Kaling's avoidance of a direct address of 'racial issues' appears largely driven by a desire for *The Mindy Project* to not be pigeonholed as 'an Indian show' because of the implications that could have for its financial backing, marketing, and network support. In her interview with NPR, Kaling says,

I think as women, you know, if you are considered a pioneer in these things, you can get really distracted by these other things — you know, people's demands of

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<sup>255</sup> A refresher example: During her previously cited NPR interview on outsider status and industry sexism, Kaling discussed her frustration with a critic who called her out for not responding to criticisms that her show should engage with race more directly: "I'm an actor and a writer and a showrunner and I edit my show. ...I have a job that three people usually have, and I have it in one person. And the idea that the critic thought that I had this excess of time for which I could go to, like, panels or write essays was just so laughable to me." NPR, 2014

<sup>256</sup> Ansari, Aziz. "Aziz Ansari on Acting, Race and Hollywood." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Nov. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/arts/television/aziz-ansari-on-acting-race-and-hollywood.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/arts/television/aziz-ansari-on-acting-race-and-hollywood.html?_r=0).

<sup>257</sup> In fact, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, Kaling is making her own subtler contributions to the conversation in ways often overlooked by critics.

you reflecting on your otherness. And for this white critic to say, "I don't understand why she doesn't do that" — and you're like, "It's because I'm running a show on a major network and I want the show to continue."<sup>258</sup>

In contrast, Ansari's freedom to speak has a two-fold origin. He knows that he is not being solely tasked with defining Indian American popular culture<sup>259</sup>, and he is not being constrained by the network model of television.

On network television, unless a show has proven to be a wild commercial success, the possibility of cancellation always looms even for those with the most ardent of supporters. Comparatively, Netflix's embrace of the 'binge-watch' model which offers upfront full-season contracts (rather than having to wait uncertainly for confirmation of renewal) for in-house/original shows opens up avenues for creators to pursue bolder and more cohesive narratives. Explaining his decision to accept Netflix's offer, Ansari said, "We pitched only to premium spots cause we didn't want to deal with content issues. On Netflix, we never had one issue with content. Also, no need to edit to commercials."<sup>260</sup>

The question of network support is a huge factor in determining the creative and commercial direction of a show. In an interview with *Slate*, Jeong expresses his gratitude at the support shown by his network in airing and promoting his show: "[F]rankly, it's really cool for ABC to say, 'Hey, we can have not just one, but two Asian American family sitcoms.' Because having more than one takes the pressure off of all of us." However, this sentiment does not appear to be echoed by the show's critics. Robert Bianco of *USA Today* writes, the series "is less about any specific struggles such families may face in our multicultural society than it is about finding new ways to repackage the same workplace or household, floundering father or bad boss jokes we've all heard a thousand times."<sup>261</sup> Mary McNamara's assessment of the show allows that the familiar premise of the show's family comedy format would be more palatable if, not only were it funnier and more

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<sup>258</sup> NPR, NPR, 16 Oct. 2014, [www.npr.org/2014/10/16/356390794/comedian-mindy-kaling-on-refusing-to-be-an-outsider-and-sexism-on-set](http://www.npr.org/2014/10/16/356390794/comedian-mindy-kaling-on-refusing-to-be-an-outsider-and-sexism-on-set).

<sup>259</sup> The response to *The Mindy Project* has made it apparent that pinpointing what an Indian should/does look like is not easy.

<sup>260</sup> Nededog, Jethro. "3 reasons Aziz Ansari took his critically acclaimed new show, 'Master of None,' to Netflix." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 13 Nov. 2015, [uk.businessinsider.com/why-aziz-ansari-took-master-of-none-to-netflix-2015-11?r=US&IR=T](http://uk.businessinsider.com/why-aziz-ansari-took-master-of-none-to-netflix-2015-11?r=US&IR=T).

<sup>261</sup> Bianco, Robert. "Review: 'Dr. Ken' needs medical attention, STAT." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 1 Oct. 2015, [www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/columnist/2015/10/01/review-dr-ken-needs-medical-attention/73029084/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/columnist/2015/10/01/review-dr-ken-needs-medical-attention/73029084/).

heartfelt, but did more to “[explore] the cultural influences of a multi-generational Korean family.”<sup>262</sup>

It is difficult to interpret Jeong's work without knowing precisely the level of influence network executives/guidelines have on his writing and performance. Jeong speaks proudly of being “surrounded with 12 hand-picked writers, who know exactly the kind of jokes and stories I want and which ones I don't,” implying that there is little gatekeeping that occurs between the script as produced in the writer's room and what ultimately makes it to air. Jeong must certainly be aware of the indications of *Dr. Ken's* home being on ABC's Friday nights, where the network has a long history of established attempts at multi-cam family sitcoms. This seeming incongruity between Jeong's most notorious personas (*Community's* Senor Chang and *The Hangover's* Leslie Chow) appears to drive the bulk of the critiques of his performance. “Either there's a tonal uncertainty purposefully written into Jeong's character,” *The Post's* TV critic Hank Stuever writes. “Or, more possibly, the multi-cam sitcom format is too constrictive for the kind of humour Jeong showed in other projects.”<sup>263</sup> Similarly, Brian Lowry of *Variety* opined that “Even allowing for the throwback 'TGIF'-style elements, the show presents a neutered version of the wild-and-crazy persona for which Jeong (who shares script credit on the pilot) is known.”<sup>264</sup>

This insistence on delimiting the type of character Jeong can and should play problematises the ostensible post-racial context of the show's creation and response. [i.e. “It's great that a Korean American has his own show, but why isn't he behaving in the way I expect him to? How can I laugh at the unfamiliar?” For a white show, wouldn't it be enough to say it's not funny? Why do we expect people of colour to take on the emotional and intellectual labour of furthering and strengthening anti-racist discussions?] Edward Schiappa cautions that it is impossible to create representations that will elicit from all

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<sup>262</sup> McNamara, Mary. “ABC's 'Dr. Ken' comedy needs a heart and humor transplant.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 1 Oct. 2015, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-review-dr-ken-20151002-column.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-review-dr-ken-20151002-column.html).

<sup>263</sup> “Fall TV Preview 2015: Every new show, the schedule for every returning show, and whats worth watching.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, [www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/entertainment/2015-fall-tv-preview/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/entertainment/2015-fall-tv-preview/).

<sup>264</sup> Lowry, Brian. “TV Review: ‘Dr. Ken’.” *Variety*, 30 Sept. 2015, [variety.com/2015/tv/reviews/dr-ken-review-ken-jeong-comedy-abc-1201602912/](http://variety.com/2015/tv/reviews/dr-ken-review-ken-jeong-comedy-abc-1201602912/).

audiences the “right” responses in terms of attitudes or stereotyping behaviour.<sup>265</sup> The reaction of critics to Jeong's work recalls the fact that post-racial discourses are often employed by media to reimagine and project a multiculturalised nation, as well as prescribe how citizens should understand their own and others' racial identities in the public sphere, in public policy, and in private life.

In *The Post-Racial Mystique*, Catherine R. Squires writes,

The most widely available approaches to the post-racial are troubling because they inherit a lot of the same elements of past articulations of how to solve the colour line in ways that are seemingly oblivious to the critiques and contributions of people of colour and their allies to rethinking race and racism.<sup>266</sup>

When it appears that a creative of colour has latched on to a similar 'inheritance' and presents an 'oblivious' (i.e. not explicitly anti-racist (i.e. similar to most 'white' productions)) contribution to the post-racial cultural conversation, can they be critiqued in the same way that a white person would be? How might it be possible to take into account the 'survival mechanism' aspect of reifying white structures? And ultimately, how productive is it really to judge the 'subversiveness' of a given cultural product?

Placing a critical darling like *Master of None* in conversation about authenticity with a critically panned show like *Dr. Ken* might seem the set-up for a counterintuitively simple argument, but this is only the case if authenticity is assumed to be a corollary of quality. In fact, reading these two shows in parallel is a useful study of how the notion of authenticity as fidelity to an originary way of being impedes creative representations of minorities. Since its inception, *Master of None* has been hailed a not just a post-racial but a post-modern vehicle for the boundary-reimagining narratives of Ansari, while *Dr. Ken* has been resolutely panned by critics as lacking in humour or pathos. It is for this reason that interest in judging the objective 'quality' of each show must be set aside to instead consider how their narrative-writing and public receptions force a grappling with the notion of authenticity as adaptation.

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<sup>265</sup> Schiappa, Edward. *Beyond representational correctness: Rethinking criticism of popular media*. Suny Press, 2008.

<sup>266</sup> Squires, Catherine R. *The post-racial mystique: Media and race in the twenty-first century*. NYU Press, 2014.

The most obvious difference between the shows, and the one that acts as the most straightforward litmus test in pop cultural debates about a show's authenticity, is their formats. *Master of None*, a Netflix Original show, has far greater leeway to play with length. An episode can last between 20 minutes to one hour, whereas homed on ABC, *Dr. Ken* is confined to the traditional 22-minute sitcom format. Stylistically, Ansari uses his platform to reveal to audiences his television and film influences, crafting loving homages throughout the series: a love letter to New York, containing three interlinked stories of the city's people, pays respects to a long history of filmmakers; the Apartment episode at the end of the first season one, which tracks the progress of Dev's romantic relationship within the four walls of his apartment; Season Two's opening episode was set in black-and-white and featured the theft of a bicycle as an homage to Fellini.

These are standout moments on the show, certainly, but the way in which they have been written about tends to omit that in the history of television, none of this is particularly new. Tri-parters, bottle episodes, Italian homages: network sitcoms have been doing this for a long time, but the specific desire to attach the 'prestige television' label to a work by a person of colour has led reviews to use these filmmaking techniques as evidence of authenticity.<sup>267</sup> In comparison, *Dr. Ken* is a sitcom of most traditional order - garish lighting, canned laughter, two-camera filming. For many, it was passe from the start, regardless of what its content might offer for consideration. Its heightened artifice meant that it had more work to do to convince people of its value as a valuable cultural artifact. This is not to argue that *Dr. Ken* has been unfairly maligned - much of the show's content is disappointing in its lowest-common-denominator offensive interests - but that it is worth contemplating how the spaces in which a story unfolds affects how that story is received.

### **Aziz Ansari and *Master of None***

Aziz Ansari's Netflix series '*Master of None*' is about the life of a struggling actor in New York, a familiar set-up for many American sitcoms of the 90s and 2000s, this time complicated by the fact that Ansari's character, Dev, is Indian American and must thus

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<sup>267</sup> Ansari especially benefits from comparisons to comedian Louis C.K, his comedic mentor whose show Louie is often held up a beacon of auteur success. Though often funny and incisive, Louie's stylistic flourishes often masked hackneyed writing, and on a more serious note, disturbing personal revelations about the comedian that have recently come to head in a form of sexual assault allegations.

navigate his profession, the city, and American living in a raced body. Centering the brown body as the focus of self-discovery is crucial as often the right to self-actualization, with the ensuing and inevitable peaks and pitfalls such a journey, is a realm occupied solely and proprietarily by white faces. Perhaps not the actualization process itself, which is critical to human development in general, but rather the (non-white) individual's ability/right to be assured that they are not alone in their concerns and struggles. The argument that media representation is a lesser facet in the fight for equal rights - in the light of threats of violence, anti-immigration sentiments, hate crimes, etc. - obscures the fact that visibility has close ties to empathy. Ansari's work adds to a growing canon that challenges the impositions of whiteness on non-whiteness by attempting to dismantle the notion that one must transition between identities to reach a point of self-discovery. However, his efforts to reject the alienation thought to be intrinsic to a 'doubleness'<sup>268</sup> of identity - comprising racial and national loyalties at war/odds with one another - often fall short. While Ansari does try to engage with the hybrid origins of Asian Americanness, his work ends up reifying notions of homogeneity - a concept often used as shorthand for relatability - using the specific lived reality of his Indian Americans experience to subtly argue for the possibility and in fact preferability of compartmentalization.

It is useful to first examine how Ansari succeeds in defying whiteness through edifying viewers on minority representations. Daryl Hamamoto uses Patricia Hill Collins' notion of controlling images to examine the ideological context in which television images of Asian Americans are produced. Hamamoto argues that American media has engaged in the practice of political, economic, and "psychosocial dominance" of subordinate groups through objectification.<sup>269</sup> For example, Ansari defies the controlling image of the docile and neutered Asian male right off the bat by beginning the series with his body engaged in sexual practice with a white woman, an image that jars loose the fixed perception of Indian men as sexually ambivalent, caught between femininity and threat.

By explicitly assigning value to aspects of minority stereotypes that are ridiculed and maligned in scholarship and the popular media, Ansari challenges some of the basic

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<sup>268</sup> This of course refers to the idea of 'double consciousness' put forth by W.E.B. DuBois as a way of understanding the black experience in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *The souls of black folk*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>269</sup> Hamamoto, Darrell Y. *Monitored peril: Asian Americans and the politics of TV representation*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 73.

ideas inherent in an ideology of domination, particularly through his (re)interpretation of the Asian American male narrative. If history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives, what is the narrative of Asian American masculinity? Yen Le Espiritu described all the images of Asian American men as "alternatively inferior, threatening, or praiseworthy."<sup>270</sup> Racist images collapsed gender and sexuality so that Asian American men appeared to be both hypermasculine and effeminate. In order to prevent miscegenation from occurring, popular images of Asian men as sexually deviant, asexual, effeminate or luring white women to their opium dens were created.<sup>271</sup>

A show like *Master of None* existing in an intently/intentionally post-racial television landscape is inevitable because while it upends the idea that the absence of Other-ness is necessary to a show's success by having a protagonist of colour, it stays well within the bounds of relatability in order to connect with audiences. It presumes a commonality despite ethnic difference: although *Master of None* highlights Ansari's position as a minority to explore this difference, it often leaves the viewer that difference is simultaneously real and imagined – real in that is built into the structure of white supremacy, but imagined as it possible for non-whites to choose to step out of their experiences of it. Responding to the instinct of the marginalised to intuit the act of 'being watched', Ansari's work seems to accept that surveillance is par for the course and those who choose to rail against it are unnecessarily calling attention to race, outside of specifically delineated boundaries.

When Other-ness is centered in culture, the content is expected to grapple with 'serious' topics like the trauma of white supremacy, immigration, and imperialism. Why is it the responsibility of the marginalised to confront the sources of their marginalization? The weight of racial oppression is bound up with the implacable will to resist. The dialectic of white supremacy is reliant on the oppressed, and when the opposition gains too much power to be repressed, the entire system is thrown into question. Such changes have the potential to profoundly alter racial identities and social practices. Is Ansari's

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<sup>270</sup> Yen Le Espiritu. *Asian American women and men: Labor, laws, and love*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2008: p. 98.

<sup>271</sup> Hirabayashi, Lane Ryo. *Teaching Asian America: Diversity and the problem of community*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.



work part of the cause or the result of the current break/overhaul taking place in popular culture?

The concept of the Asian American dual personality, which suggests two distinct and separable parts to the Asian American identity, leads to the lack of Asian American presence in culture. A perceived lack of 'committedness' to one identity over another - that is, American over Asian in all respects - keeps Asian American presence in the background. The historical categorization of Asia and its multitudinous nations as abject realms encourages any formation of an Asian American cultural identity to distance itself from orientalist constructions of assumed shared origins. Ansari's production counters how racial performance is often the dominant narrative of how Asian Americans are represented in American culture. Asian American characters often undergo an erasure of their personal/collective awareness of their own cultural history in order to facilitate untroubled assimilation into American narratives.

In *Master of None*, despite its avant garde ethos, race is still treated as a Very Special Episode issue. Ansari acknowledges that race complicates everyday interactions in ways sublime and poor, but rather than confronting it as an ongoing force for mobilization or restriction, he boxes it into specific areas and elides over its presence in others. The fact that these Very Special Episodes of *Master of None* are so skilfully executed makes it all the more frustrating that similar nuances are not evident in 'regular' episodes.

In the latter half of the pilot, when Dev runs into his ex-girlfriend in a boutique toy store, she reveals that she has a husband now — an outdoorsy lawyer from Connecticut — as well as a baby and a house in the Hamptons. Dev, surprised and a little smug, cracks wise: "Sounds like a nice white family." Her reply is swift: "He's black." The structural construction of this joke speaks specifically to the sort of humour Ansari is trying to convey through the writing on *Master of None*. It turns not on racism so much as race: the assumptions, suggestions, and stereotypes that scaffold day-to-day interactions. Dev's jab relies on a simple premise — a hiking-obsessed, East Coast-bred lawyer named Dylan is probably Caucasian — but it also seems to veil a familiar insecurity, a subterranean fear that brown men are less desirable to women than their white counterparts, and an

internalised projection of the burden of racial difference onto the Asian (American) male body.

In the run-up to the show's release, Ansari offered candid insight into the way the television industry deals with race. At the end of October, following a screening at EW Fest, Ansari provided the context for Dev's existence: It was not the role anyone would have naturally written for him, and so he had to write it for himself. "No one would have been like, 'Hey, how about we get Aziz to do this 10-episode show and have play [sic] this thoughtful character.'" <sup>272</sup> At best, he continued, they might write something based on his most famous character, the goofy and image-obsessed (and under-masculinised) Tom Haverford from NBC's *Parks and Recreation*. Dev is always interrogating, always wading into the subtext of his own identity. In one episode, he struggles with a classic first-generation hang-up: The guilt of never being as competent, as persevering and self-sacrificing and generous, as his immigrant parents. Ansari examines the difficulty, when trapped between one's heritage and one's privilege, of not feeling like a mere imitation of an imitation.

In an article for *The New York Times*, Ansari grapples with his own complicity in the representational deficit of minority characters. His initial search for an Asian American to play the part of one of his friends proved fruitless for a number of reasons, not least because the specificity of the role - a part both comic and romantic, and far more fleshed out and well-written than that of most other characters of colour on contemporary television - required the kind of acting skills that few non-white actors are given the opportunity to develop. Ansari's issues with casting underscores the fact that the argument that a role simply goes to the best person for the job, regardless of colour, falls flat when the realities of the talent pool are considered. As he notes, "When you cast a white person, you can get anything you want: 'You need a white guy with red hair and one arm? Here's six of 'em!'" <sup>273</sup>

*Master of None* may not be concerned with sweeping revolutionary processes, but when it chooses to turn its lens on it, it is effective at opining with precision the

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<sup>272</sup> "EW Fest: See the entire Aziz Ansari panel." *EW.com*, [www.ew.com/article/2015/10/26/ew-fest-aziz-ansari-panel-video](http://www.ew.com/article/2015/10/26/ew-fest-aziz-ansari-panel-video).

<sup>273</sup> Ansari, Aziz. "Aziz Ansari on Acting, Race and Hollywood." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Nov. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/arts/television/aziz-ansari-on-acting-race-and-hollywood.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/arts/television/aziz-ansari-on-acting-race-and-hollywood.html).

subtle indignities visited upon minorities on a daily basis. The appeal of Ansari's work lies in his ability to recognize the absurdity in justifications of racial improprieties within post-racial society and its by post-racial (white) members, and to turn that recognition back onto them in a slow act of 'unveiling'.

In a study of the intertextuality of Jean Renoir's films, Keith A. Reader observes that stars are a natural vehicle for intertextuality. He notes, "The very concept of a film star is an intertextual one, relying as it does on correspondences of similarity and difference from one film to the next, and sometimes too on supposed resemblances between on- and off-screen personae."<sup>274</sup> Though brief, Reader's observation is useful in highlighting both the linkages between roles and the associations with off-screen personae. Aziz capitalises on the audience's familiarity with his persona as a stand-up comic, a actor of colour, and a decidedly millennial voice in popular culture, and in *Master of None* he inhabits the intersection of these identities in complex ways that often simultaneously challenge and reinforce various concerns when it comes to minority representations.

Aziz further uses intertextuality by having Dev's background and mannerisms hew closely to his own life that viewers would be familiar with. A particularly striking example of intertextuality skilfully deployed occurs at the beginning of the 'Indians on TV' episode.<sup>275</sup> The episode opens with a litany of images that would be immediately recognizable for those with even a passing acquaintance with American culture - the history of Indian American representation that culminates with the particularly tasteless image of Ashton Kutcher in brownface for a Popchip ad from as recently as 2012. The characters span decades and various media, but spliced together and presented one after another as they are consumed through the eyes of Ansari's character, Dev, it is clear that Ansari intends to convey the myriad ways Indian Americans – and more generally, Asian Americans – have been portrayed in the media as largely one-dimensional and wildly pigeonholed.

The episode opens with a telling and superbly edited montage of Indian stereotypes from film and television. Young Dev watches these, soaking them up. The few

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<sup>274</sup> Worton, Michael. *Intertextuality: theories and practices*. Manchester University Press, 1991: p. 176.

<sup>275</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. "Indians On TV." *Master of None*. Netflix: 6 November 2015. Netflix.

examples he has of Indian men on television do not necessarily reflect his own experiences. *Master of None* wastes no time in establishing just how much power media has over the way people – particularly minorities – [are made to] think about themselves. Ravi and Anush's whole worlds are shaken up when Dev reveals the truth about Ben Jhaveri in the movie *Short Circuit 2* – that the actor who plays him, Fisher Stevens, is a white man in brownface, a revelation Ansari went through himself in college.

The narrative sees Dev and fellow actor Ravi (Ravi Patel) audition for an “unnamed cab driver” role in a crime drama, and Ravi emerges from his audition elated. Dev, next in line, does not. A conversation with the casting director reveals that the part requires an accent, and Dev chafes at the idea. Ravi and Dev meet for coffee shortly after, and what follows is something rarely seen on TV: a frank conversation between two people of colour about the pros and cons of peddling stereotypes. The show purposefully avoids castigating either party, offering both equal screen time to explain the motivations behind their decisions. Ravi offers a simple rationale - he needs work, and many cab drivers do have accents. However, Dev pushes back, intent on proving that a brown man can get the same sort of everyman roles often offered to a popular white actor “like Bradley Cooper”.

Here, Ansari uses the question of casting to make a point about how terrible even 'well-meaning' proponents of post-raciality can be. The show lampoons the sort of self-congratulatory storytelling that flattens minority characters into helpless victims of discrimination unable to wrest control of their own subjectivities. Instead, Ansari and co-creator Alan Yang practice equal-opportunity implication, an approach that treats people of colour as conflicted, accountable human beings who are constantly making decisions about how to pass, how to assert themselves, and how to navigate the trappings of racism while being prodded by ulterior motives that could allow them to benefit.

As Dev and Ravi are talking about the unspoken rule that there cannot be more than one Indian in a television show without it suddenly becoming labeled as an “Indian show” that’s “not for the mainstream” (“mainstream” being a Hollywood euphemism for “white people”), the show in which they exist is actively breaking that rule. Not only is there ‘more than one’, but there are three Indian men in the room, and all of them are distinct, fleshed-out characters who do not embody a single one of Hollywood’s lazy

stereotypes about desis. Gerrard Lobo's Anush is an especially interesting character: On the surface level, his obsession with working out is funny, but the character also subtly works against the dominant narrative in Hollywood that South Asian men are weak, desexualised nerds. Ravi, Dev, and Anush each cannot be summed up in a single sentence full of coded language like all of the casting notices Dev and Ravi come across in their acting careers. They are not set decorations but instead central characters, with real emotions and points of view that drive the show's story beats.

Ansari and Yang complicate both Dev and Ravi's principles by writing them into a situation that forces them to compromise the greater good for their own self-interest. When Dev gets accidentally forwarded an email chain that features a network executive, Jerry Danvers (Adam Grupper), saying "there can be only one" Indian in the show and suggesting they should see which of them could "*curry* their favour." Though Dev's friends encourage him to leak the racist email, his agent Shannon (Danielle Brooks) suggests that he use it for leverage against Danvers instead. Later, when Danvers takes Dev to a Knicks game to apologize, rapper Busta Rhymes who is also in business with Danvers, offers sly encouragement: "Don't play the race card; charge it to the race card."

Ansari and Yang establish a familiar situation in which well-meaning principles brush up against the ugly realities of the entertainment industrial complex. Dev is clearly troubled by Danvers insistence that there cannot be two Indians in the same network show, made all the more potent by the power he wields over television representation, but he also wants to cash out the benefit that he believes will come his way if he stays silent and takes a role on the show. When Dev tries to convince Ravi that the email should not be leaked, he makes excuses about how Indians are not yet at "there can be two" status, and says that he should take the role because it would be great if there was (at least) one well-rounded Indian character on TV, effectively accepting society's low representational bar. These are the knotty issues inherent in racial representation: On one hand, it is a powerful thing to feel like an agent for social progress in popular culture, but it is also essential to make a living, which inevitably means swallowing systemic prejudice in the hope that more opportunities will open up down the line.

However, when Danvers betrays Dev by casting another Indian actor in the role, Dev suddenly wants to leak the email, assuming the principles he so quickly abandoned

when it was financially expedient to do so. It is important to note that Ansari and Yang do not harshly criticize Dev for his actions, no matter how flighty and hypocritical, because they are the actions of a minority forced to compromise their integrity for practical purposes. Dev has been dealt bad hands every time he goes out for roles that would rather conform to stereotypes than challenge them, and thus has to manoeuvre an intricate bureaucracy that has no interest in personally serving him. Ansari mines Dev's unstable principles for humour but he also trusts the audience recognises that it is understandable that Dev's position keeps shifting with more and more information. Dev claims that his primary recourse after being betrayed by Danvers is to get a bunch of Indians to tweet mean stuff at him, tacitly acknowledging that there are no immediately visible substantial solutions or long-term remedies.

Even when an ostensibly good opportunity comes along for a minority actor, like when Danvers suddenly dies of a heart attack and a young progressive network exec becomes interested in Dev, they are often co-opted by capitalist interests beyond any one person's control. The young exec wants to feature Dev and Ravi on a "fresh, innovative" new series: A reboot of the 1980s series *Perfect Strangers* with an assimilated Indian American and his fresh-off-the-boat cousin replacing the original show's leads of Larry Appleton (Mark Linn-Baker) and Balki Bartokomous (Bronson Pinchot, playing a heavily accented character of ambiguous Mediterranean descent), which, of course, demands either Dev or Ravi to adopt an Indian accent for the role, something neither of them want to do. Ansari and Yang demonstrate that even the most outwardly progressive people in power are still beholden to a system that dictates old idea be privileged over new ones.

Ansari and Yang use 'Indians on TV' not to condemn Dev, Ravi, or even Danvers for the choices that they make but to focus on how white supremacy at work in Hollywood forces people, even those with the best of intentions, to make the small compromises that allow a world with such a dearth of diverse minority roles to exist. Dev poses the question, "What if we tried [the show] with me and Ravi and see what happens?" but quickly backtracks when Danvers brings up the money he's poised to make., leading Ravi to call him an "Uncle Taj." Thus, Ansari and Yang portray how a culture apathetic to real progressive change drives minorities to reject their beliefs, turn against each other, and to accept less than what they deserve. In lieu of offering solutions, they simply illustrate

how difficult it is to live with this problem, leaving the audience to grapple with the answers themselves.

This nuanced take is then undermined in Season Two in two specific instances. The first is when the word 'curry' is used to decidedly different effect than in the previous example mentioned in this chapter. In one episode, Dev's season long love interest Francesca (Alessandra Mastronardi) alludes to disliking spicy foods but liking "curry people".<sup>276</sup> Instead of becoming offended as he did with Danvers, Dev simply says that her comment is not funny and moves the conversation on. This indicates the selective pass that he doles on when it comes to what white people in his life are allowed to get away with. While it is understandable that a personal relationship would affect how someone responds to racist microaggressions, to intentionally write this moment into a show reveals *Master of None's* post-racial concerns of not wanting or allowing race to matter until it does: when it can be used as leverage, perhaps, but not when it might jeopardize one's chance at intimacy. This scene is of note especially because it is based on a real-life incident with Mastronardi, during which Ansari was auditioning her for the role and she made the 'curry person' joke off-the-cuff.<sup>277</sup> Ansari found it so funny that he had to include it in his script, somewhat conveniently forgetting the having charge this particular term to the race card the season before.

In the second season's fourth episode, Dev goes on a series of awkward but entertaining first dates with many different women, including a white woman named Christine (Lauren Miller), to whose home he returns at the end of the evening.<sup>278</sup> Things progress in bed to the point that she asks Dev to grab a condom from a jar on her dresser. Reaching for the jar, Dev is shocked to realize the jar is a ceramic caricature of a fat black woman wearing a bonnet and apron, her hands on her hips – a 'mammy'. Although startled, Dev hesitates only briefly before retrieving a condom and proceeding to sleep with Christine. It is only after sex that Dev calls Christine out on the obscenity of her belonging, stating that the jar is racist:

Christine: Racist?

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<sup>276</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. "Amarsi un Po." *Master of None*. Netflix: 12 May 2017. Netflix.

<sup>277</sup> Yuan, Jada. "Aziz Ansari Recaps *Master of None's* 'Amarsi Un Po'." *Vulture*, 13 June 2017, [www.vulture.com/2017/06/aziz-ansari-recaps-master-of-none-amarsi-un-po.html](http://www.vulture.com/2017/06/aziz-ansari-recaps-master-of-none-amarsi-un-po.html).

<sup>278</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. "First Date." *Master of None*. Netflix: 12 May 2017. Netflix.

Dev: You can't use that shade of black to depict African American people!

Christine: No one else has ever been offended by it.

When Dev asks what black people think of the jar, which was gifted to Christine by one of her (presumably white) friends, she replies, "I haven't had any African American guests." Her surprise that this jar would be considered offensive is genuine, which makes it all the more painful for viewers. Her incredulity that Dev had sex with her despite thinking she is a bigot mirrors the audience's secondhand disgust. When she kicks him out of her apartment, he suggests that she show the jar to a black person some time and gauge his or her reaction.

The scene is played for laughs and is meant to reflect the awkwardness of initial sexual encounters with relative strangers, with a tinge of racial critique. However, this interaction reveals more about Dev's and perhaps Ansari's own ethics than the latter may have realised. Christine's antiblackness is part and parcel of what is now colloquially termed 'hipster racism', which is in fact standard racism wielded by those who think themselves above 'real' bigotry. Racism is an object of the past, a kitsch relic that bears no weight on present day practices. It is inexcusable but its roots in white privilege are easily discerned. Dev's response however is the more jarring one and is firmly situated in the logic of the post-racial that allows for the disavowal of racialization even in moments that are clearly raced. The audience is meant to laugh at Dev's libido taking precedence over his antiracist beliefs, but once again it requires a black female body to act as a punchline. On one hand, it requires that sort of overt racism for Dev to speak, but at the same time, he is far enough removed from its target than he can take himself out of the moment, wag his fingers at Christine, and leave the real work to be done by black people.

Dev's actions are an inevitable outcome of neoliberalism's ongoing reliance on exploitation, whereby neoliberal actors and institutions invest in cultivating discursive strategies for maintaining this exploitation while obstructing its resultant political threats, often within the very progressive realms that might seem antithetical to such strategies. These discursive strategies take the form of post-racialism/post-racism, two of several overlapping and interlocking post-identity discourses that claim society has moved past longstanding forms of identity-based oppression.



*Master of None* falls into the trap of most contemporary post-racial cultural products when it glosses over social class and the economic precariousness many people of this generation struggle with every day. The characters live in beautiful, spacious apartments; school and loan debt is hardly mentioned; the viewer never hears concerns about bills, or even the cost of drinks at the hip bars where the characters meet. In a show that announces its attenuation to racism, sexism, diversity, and the immigrant-family experience so head on, the lack of attention to economic inequality or classism is striking, and a classic example of how within the post-racial, authenticity still hinges on neo-liberal conceptions of the self as primary actor.

As a deeply exploitative system in which power, wealth, and attention are redistributed from most of the world's inhabitants to corporate, private interests, neoliberalism harms those positioned outside the system's preferred membership. The neoliberal order is deeply invested in race-based exploitation and as Angela Davis argues, there are many "complex ways in which racism clandestinely structures prevailing institutions, practices, and ideologies"<sup>279</sup> in the neoliberal era. Jodi Melamed, for instance, demonstrates how people of colour (at home and abroad) are regularly exploited in the global economy for their "surplus value." The post-racial moment contributes to this disregard for the brutality of capitalism and its positioning of the working class as nuisances cast aside by the dismantled welfare state by refusing to acknowledge that large percentages of people of colour remain grist in the mill of the neoliberal order, including and especially first- and second-generation immigrants.

This disavowal of and disengagement from the capitalist struggle inherent to millennial politics colours the first season's penultimate episode, in which Dev and his girlfriend move in with each other.<sup>280</sup> The show follows the couple through the move-in and some of the ups and downs of the next year of the relationship, and as this happens, the viewer becomes aware that their financial arrangements are never discussed. How do they handle rent? Who pays for food? These financial concerns can be the trickiest issues to navigate in a relationship, especially in a place where rent costs are so high, yet *Master of None* ignores them entirely.

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<sup>279</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *The meaning of freedom: And other difficult dialogues*. City Lights Publishers, 2012: p. 23.

<sup>280</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. "Mornings." *Master of None*. Netflix: 12 May 2017. Netflix.

The characters are rarely if ever shown making difficult decisions about money. Rather, the series' focus highlights the banality of minor choices: which taco place to frequent, or which romantic interest to ask on a date. Dev is often shown as being paralyzed by the fear that as soon as he makes a decision on something, a better possibility will emerge as having slipped from his grasp. The show illuminates how the modern world not only allows for but in fact demands the gathering of an almost endless amount of information a choice is made. The freedoms and opportunities available to Dev and his peer are plenty, but consumer choice does not alleviate poverty, and what *Master of None* has yet to acknowledge is that too much choice is only a problem for those with the resources to choose.

When the series tries to address the uncertainty Dev and by extension his millennial peers face on employment front, it ends up glossing over the real financial issues involved. Although he is frustrated about his inconsistent acting career, Dev rarely exhibits concern about being paid or paying bills (a passing comment is made about him having received significant compensation from work he did on a yoghurt commercial). He spends months working on a movie, presumably to earn money, but when he learns that his part was cut and a friend assures him, "Dude, look on the bright side – at least you got paid pretty well," he simply responds, "Not really. I was mainly doing it for the exposure." At the end of show's first season, after his career stalls and his relationship ends, he books a flight to Italy to explore his passion for pasta.<sup>281</sup> The audience is made to suspend disbelief as no sense of his financial situation is given: How is he paying for the "pasta making school" he enrolled in? When his seatmate on the flight to Italy asks him if he decided to make this big move, "just like that?" Dev confirms, "Just like that."

For many millennials, making these kinds of choices is not nearly as simple. Any pursuit of passion at work must be balanced by practical financial concerns. Yet Dev, as a second generation immigrant, appears to be coasting on the sacrifices of his parents. Though the series offers little reflection on the privileges afforded by Dev's apparent financial situation, Ansari does seem to recognize that middle class immigrant children often take certain luxuries for granted. In a show that has been noted for its social awareness in representing the lives and dilemmas of today's young adults, the lack of

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<sup>281</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. "Finale." Netflix. ABC: 6 November 2015. Netflix.

attention to the economic precariousness of millennials speaks to the continued neoliberal fascination with performative displays of self-sufficiency.

In interviews, Ansari is often asked about his 'vision' for the show, reflecting the significant amount of creative control he wields over it. This vision is tied to an authenticity linked to artistic ambition - it presumes that minorities must try harder to define themselves because they must break the mold of stereotypes - a mold that is not similarly assigned to white creators who are given the privilege of creating from a position of neutrality. It is difficult to imagine for example, a show by a white person that would have episodes that make similar claims the *Master of None* episodes about parents and religion, named respectively 'Parents' and 'Religion'.

The 'Parents' episode occurs early in the series run, as the second episode of the first season, as though Ansari knew that he would be asked about it and wanted to preempt that line of questioning.<sup>282</sup> The episode opens with a flashback to the year 1983, in which a man with a moustache and a woman with mermaid hair make their way to New York City. The woman is afraid to answer the phone because her accent makes people shout as though she is hard of hearing. The man, a doctor, can only smile as his colleagues shut him out of the normal rites of passage: no welcome dinner, no slaps on the back. These are Dev's parents, Ramesh and Nisha Shah, played by Shoukath and Fatima Ansari, Ansari's real life parents. There is something to be said about the authenticity of the casting decision. Ansari's parents are playing characters and telling stories that might not necessarily be their own, but audience members watching who are aware of the real-life familial links are bound to imbue the show's relationship dynamics with an honesty that is perhaps unearned.

Early in the episode, Ansari, through Dev, indicates why he has given his parents starring roles. Both Ansari and his character are warped expressions of the freedom their parents left India to find. His success, debatable as it is, is undeniably not of the stable shape theirs took — the uncertain life of a comic actor is inverse to the steadily progressing career path of a doctor. "Parents" is honest about the hardships Brian and Dev's parents faced. When Dev eagerly asks his mother what her first day in America was like, she tells him that she sat on the couch and cried. Dev muses while walking through

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<sup>282</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. "Parents." Netflix. ABC: 6 November 2015. Netflix.

New York with his fellow second-generation friend, Chinese American Brian, “Isn’t that the gist of every immigrant story? ‘It was hard.’” It is easy for Dev and Brian to generalize their own parents’ experiences, because neither of them have thought to ask for more information. When they take their parents to dinner as a way of thanking them, they hear stories that give greater depth and nuance to their parents’ experiences other than just being “hard.” Dev’s mother may find a bond with Brian’s father over their shared fear of answering the phone when they first immigrated to America, but the episode also gets at the notion that there is no monolithic immigrant experience.

The success of this episode, measured by the critical response to the ‘accuracy’ of its writing, is unsurprising and not the issue at hand. However, the genuine realizations and discomfort Dev comes to and tries to work through, as a result of his experiences as a second generation Indian American, make scant appearance in the rest of the show’s run. It crops up again directly once more in the Religion episode.

“Religion” opens with a montage of resistant kids being dragged by their parents to their respective places of worship, suggesting a widely relatable concept.<sup>283</sup> However, as the story zooms in on Dev, starting with his childhood discovery of bacon and the fact that he is not allowed to eat it due to his religion, “Religion” ends up telling a much more specific story, acting as a quasi-sequel to “Parents.” “Religion” grapples with intersecting aspects of Dev’s identity as a second-generation immigrant in an Islam-practicing Indian family. It is as much about Dev’s life as a second-generation young person as it is about religion because the two are inextricable for Dev. The pressure on him to pretend that he is more religious than he actually is when around family is tied to the relationship with his parents so poignantly explored in “Parents.”

Dev’s aunt, uncle, and cousin Navid (Harris Gani) visit for Eid and Dev’s father reminds him he needs to perform piousness in front of his family members in order to keep up appearances. Without their parents around, Dev takes his cousin out to eat at a barbecue festival and attempts to poke holes in the religious facade Navid has also put up for his parents’ sake. He is surprised to learn Navid really does not eat pork, but Navid confesses to not following all parts of Islam, admitting that he has started drinking and has no intentions of letting his parents find out. When they think they see Navid’s father

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<sup>283</sup> Ansari, Aziz, prod. “Religion.” *Master of None*. Netflix: 12 May 2017. Netflix.

at the festival, they literally dive behind a tree. Rejecting their religion would be seen as rejecting their heritage, rejecting their identity, rejecting the traditions their parents have fought to preserve in a country that largely regards their religion and identity with hostility.

Ultimately, Dev decides that he is too old to keep lying to his family. Over Eid dinner at a Thai restaurant, he orders the crispy pork special, much to the disappointment of his mother, who says they will leave if he insists on ordering it. After the debacle at the Thai restaurant, Ramesh visits Dev to explain why his defiance was such a big deal. He tells him he is free to do whatever he wants in life, but when he does certain things, like eat pork, in front of his mother, it hurts her feelings. It makes them feel like they have failed him, Ramesh explains.

At the end of the episode, director Alan Yang weaves together two scenes: Ramesh praying at the mosque and Dev meeting his friends for brunch. The scenes are stitched together in a way that emphasises their similarities, father and son partaking in the rituals they care about, both surrounded by people they care about. It is a powerful image and a rare instance where Islam is seen being practiced on television in a non-threatening context, making “Religion” quietly subversive. The episode is compelling in the specificity of Dev’s relationship with Islam and how it interplays with his relationship with his parents. However, the episode ends on a pointed note. The camera lingers on the Quranic passage Dev is most drawn to, and which he invokes earlier in the episode to explain his beliefs to his parents: “To you be your religion, and to me my religion.”

This passage is meaningful for many Muslims, as it speaks to the absence of compulsion in the religion, particularly significant in an era where sectarian and racialised violence are attributed to scripture, but read within the post-racial context that *Master of None* locates itself in, it is possible to read it as a reluctance to engage with how one person’s practices are necessarily informed by the decisions of others. Ansari avails himself of the responsibility of speaking for every Muslim and Indian American but does not acknowledge how, in his public position, he is contributing to a narrative that necessitates the compartmentalization of identities and demands that he answer for his own history in a way that white people do not have to.

## Ken Jeong and *Dr. Ken*

Acknowledging both its successes and its faults, *Master of None* performs a specific function in contemporary minority representation. Netflix provided Ansari with a way in to tell stories in his unique voice, and his work has rightfully been given attribution. However, in lauding Ansari, it would be an incomplete understanding of how representation works if only critically acclaimed shows were attended to. *Dr. Ken* poses a challenge for cultural critics because it seems to announce its mediocrity from the get-go. It positions itself squarely in the midst of a very white American medium and forces the viewer to engage with the visual dissonance. Even if audience members are not personally biased, they are still part of a racist system, in Hollywood and at large, that has denied Asian Americans access to the old school soundstages. The plotlines on *Dr. Ken* tread familiar sitcom ground of misunderstandings and obviously telegraphed punchlines and it matters that the person at the centre of this is not white or black. Asian Americans are part of broad comedy but as the butt of the joke - the kung fu kenny, model minority myth, dragon mother - these are not funny stereotypes, or rather not stereotypes that can find humour in themselves. For Jeong to take up space and take up the mantle, mediocre as it may be, of TV dad is significant. It might seem facetious to argue that Asian Americans have a right to mediocrity, that is not what I'm doing. I'm saying that that mediocrity is perceived and wielded differently. Kevin James had a bad show for years, and now has a new basically identical one, but nobody is writing on the failure of whiteness as a comedic vehicle. The argument is not that it is progressive for Jeong to be telling racist jokes himself but that Asian American bodies cannot be read in the same way as that of other ethnicities.

When *Dr. Ken* premiered in the fall of 2015, it marked an unprecedented milestone for television history: following *Fresh Off the Boat*, it was the second primetime sitcom centered around an Asian American family to air during the same television season. However, while the two shows have been subjected to comparison by virtue of their superficial subject matter, it is clear upon examination that they vary in format, style, and substance. The multi-camera setup with a live studio audience of *Dr. Ken* is fundamentally different from the single-camera setup of *Fresh Off the Boat*. In particular, the audience energy and interaction during the tapings of appear designed to play to the show's star Ken Jeong's stand-up comedy background.

Jeong made his television debut on the NBC show *Community*. The introduction of his character, Señor Chang, Greendale's Spanish teacher, made full use of his manic energy. When he first meets his students, he says, "Every once in a while a student will come up to me and ask, Señor Chang, why do you teach Spanish? They say it just like that. WHY do YOU teach Spanish? Why. You."<sup>284</sup> In an uninterrupted monologue, Jeong cavorts and cackles maniacally, pre-emptively heading off racist questions ("Don't tell me that I'm 'mysterious' and 'inscrutable'!"), spouting nonsensical claims of grandeur ("In Spanish my name is El Tigre Chino!") and invading the personal space of everyone around him, as though the only reasonable response to racism is to lose one's mind, engaging in a comedic approach that was unapologetically raw, confrontational, and reminiscent of Margaret Cho's pre-television work.

Jeong's turn in *Dr. Ken* often recalls his most notable role — the sardonic, antipathy-fueled Leslie Chen of the Hangover films, a character racially unsettling for its flirtation with stereotype. Jeong often creates humour through racial dissonance by appearing as an Asian American while acting against expectation. For example, appearing in blackface on an episode of *Community*. In his acting, Jeong has been credited with subverting, as well as charged with exploiting, various contrasting stereotypes of the Asian male: inscrutability versus shrill aggression, physical ineptitude versus evil Fu Manchu genius.

The choice to blunt this aspect of Jeong's racial play-centric humour in *Dr. Ken* appears to partly underlie the show's generally negative reception among television critics. In *The New York Times*, Mike Hale expresses his "disappointment" at his inability to "laugh at" Jeong as he feels so effortlessly able to do with the Hangover movies and on *Community*.<sup>285</sup> This raises the question of the double-edged nature of Jeong's racial slapstick - what does it say when critics are delighted by Jeong in the role of clown, but lament his performance when he (in his own words) is basically playing himself?

In critiquing Jeong's performance on *Dr. Ken*, Asian American blogger Christian Fan – who had been invited for set visit – wrote, "If '*Dr. Ken*' is going to succeed, it'll

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<sup>284</sup> Harmon, Dan, prod. "Spanish 101." *Community*. NBC: 24 September 2009. Netflix.

<sup>285</sup> Hale, Mike. "Review: In 'Dr. Ken' on ABC, Ken Jeong Is a Physician With Jokes." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 Sept. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/arts/television/review-in-dr-ken-on-abc-ken-jeong-is-a-physician-with-jokes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/arts/television/review-in-dr-ken-on-abc-ken-jeong-is-a-physician-with-jokes.html?_r=0).

require Jeong to depart from a trademark style grounded in improv, physicality, and over-the-top blackface and yellowface buffoonery—qualities that don't necessarily jive with the heavily scripted, multi-camera format, much less primetime television.”<sup>286</sup>

Jeong's onscreen persona is the vast majority of his roles prior to *Dr. Ken* has tended to radiate a disorienting queerness, making his threat as much about his enigmatic sexuality as it is about his predilection for violence. In the end, his characterizations add up to a new racial caricature, the virilised, violent queer Asian male. Fan's argument rests on a reading of Jeong's work as an actor as intentionally and purposefully playing with an arch knowingness of Orientalist stereotypes, and on the assumption that Jeong's racial vocabulary is calibrated to challenge vulgar depictions of Asian Americans through an overt embrace of caricatured absurdity – placing the subtext of the given-to-be-seen at the forefront of his performances.

In his current role, to credit Jeong with subversion would be perhaps to read subtext into *Dr. Ken* that does not exist, but there is no denying Jeong's filling-in of a traditionally white (upper) middle class role is little like anything else in sitcom history. Jeong's work on *Dr. Ken* is predicated on the introduction of a striking substantive novelty within a nostalgic form: the classic sitcom format traditionally enacted and learned through White performers is being played out by a cast of Asian American characters. His approach to what is essentially a groundbreaking role - quality of humour/writing aside - recalls Margaret Cho's claim during the time *All American Girl* was on air: “The only thing I can possibly compare it to is the debut of 'The Cosby Show'. I'm Bill Cosby.”<sup>287</sup> In insinuating himself into the middle class, Jeong's injects his character into a space that has traditionally been subjected to rigorous gatekeeping.

Not unlike *The Cosby Show*, *Dr. Ken* takes a sanitised approach to its ethnic flavour, appearing to whitewash an upper middle-class family of colour to cater to the comfort of ABC's mainstream white audience. For example, when *Dr. Ken*'s traditional Korean parents come to dinner, everyone pointedly uses modern Western cutlery without a chopstick in sight. For those familiar with his previous output, it is surprising to see

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<sup>286</sup> Otterson, Joe. “Ken Jeong Rips Critic Accusing Him of ‘Yellowface Buffoonery’.” *TheWrap*, TheWrap, 28 Sept. 2015, [www.thewrap.com/ken-jeong-rips-critic-accusing-him-of-yellowface-buffoonery/](http://www.thewrap.com/ken-jeong-rips-critic-accusing-him-of-yellowface-buffoonery/).

<sup>287</sup> Quoted in Xing, Jun. *Asian America through the lens: History, representations, and identity*. Vol. 3. Rowman Altamira, 1998: p. 73.



Jeong's transformation from a Fu Manchu type to the other extreme: a conservative establishment figure out of a 1980s sitcom.

When hints of ethnic heritage arise in *Dr. Ken*, they exist within racialised contexts identifiable to those familiar with the white gaze. However, for Jeong to be a subject/participant in the racialization process raises the question of representational intent. For example, when Jeong's character imitates his father's broken English, is he mocking the expected conventions about first generation immigrants? Or is it simply a son exasperated with his father, teasing him in way that makes sense within the family's particular cultural experience? Here, it is useful to consider how Lacan appropriates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological model of vision that identifies a fundamental "reversibility" in vision; the body is both subject and object, both seeing and seen. Lacan takes up this notion of reversibility but changes the model's emphasis through an insistence that, despite the reversibility of the seeing and the seen, it is the possibility of being observed which is always primary.

Jeong often plays with the notion that racial positions, as ascribed by stereotypes and visual representations, are fluid. They transform into effects through the knowledge produced by social-historical discourses. These discourses produce what people know of each other; they shape and are shaped by positions in the racial structure. The model minority myth is an example of knowledge produced within the racial discourse of the American society. It has been applied most consistently on Asian Americans. By looking into Asian Americans in popular culture, it is possible to understand how the ideological functions of the myth enable it to endure by masking exclusion, injustice, and gatekeeping. In general, however, *Dr. Ken* avoids the natural tensions of family politics, adroitly sidestepping problems of social integration and cultural clashes. It is not simply about what is presented onscreen, but also what is vitally missing, even from 'just' a sitcom: no real dialoging or interiority, raw moments of emotional honesty or inter-generational conflict. The juggling act of Asian American identity is never broached.

Instead, the show appears adamant on functioning on the familiar trope of the incorrigible husband famously epitomised by Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*. As a middlebrow comedy, uninterested in making any sort of cultural commentary, perhaps what is most remarkable about *Dr. Ken* is that it's wholly unremarkable. Even though

critics almost universally panned the show, it was one of the first freshman shows that ABC picked up for a full season, because it had solid ratings. Yet it is almost impossible not to ask a question of ‘what if’ – specifically, what if *Dr. Ken* had premiered before *Fresh Off the Boat*? There is a good chance that it might have collapsed under pressure like *All-American Girl*. However, due to *Fresh Off the Boat*’s exceedingly positive critical reception, *Dr. Ken* has flown under the radar of most cultural critics. Freed from the burden of perfect representational accuracy, *Dr. Ken* coasts on mediocrity without the need to agonize over defending itself because it is “the only one.”

Our show is refreshingly uncultural, if that makes sense. We definitely bring in those issues—there’s an upcoming Thanksgiving episode that’s all about culture clashes—but we’re doing it in a different way. In real life, I’m Korean American, my wife is Vietnamese American, and when our in-laws come over, those aspects of us come in[to play]. But in the show, I felt the cultural aspects had to be organically introduced. Not the way a white writer might introduce it into a sitcom.<sup>288</sup>

Jeong touts the show’s “refreshingly uncultural” approach as a positive, claiming a position of neutrality. Yet is it that the show is un-cultural, or that Jeong has actively and purposefully enacted a de-culturalization of its content? At what point does relatability give way to a sanitised (and sanctioned) sense of identity as the Other?

Jeong appears to conflate ‘artistic identity’ with ‘personal identity’, indicating an intent or desire to project a familiar/identifiable/recognizable persona/character in his writing and performance. What does this say about the authenticity of Asian American (self-)representation? Jeong presents a creative image that is in control of how and what he portrays of himself - and by extension, the community of which he is a part - and yet much of the show’s content appears to pander to the white gaze.

The thing that [frustrates] me the most about that is this: You can say “I don’t like your show.” But don’t say “You’ve set Asians back 100 years.” ...So that kind of stupid crap, not coming from teenagers, but from credible writers, is what [hurts]

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<sup>288</sup> Yang, Jeff. “Ken Jeong on *Dr. Ken*, Becoming a Leading Man, and the Early Backlash to His Show.” *Slate Magazine*, 5 Oct. 2015, [www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/10/05/ken\\_jeong\\_interview\\_the\\_dr\\_ken\\_actor\\_on\\_the\\_hangover\\_community\\_diversity.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/10/05/ken_jeong_interview_the_dr_ken_actor_on_the_hangover_community_diversity.html).

Asian American entertainers when we're in this situation. You guys are judging your own people harsher than you'd judge others, and that kind of judgment is discriminatory in its own way. I think at the end of the day you should just be judged by your work, not on what effect it might have on the world or your community.<sup>289</sup>

Jeong speaks about the success of *Fresh Off the Boat* as having “incentivised everybody” into encouraging a multitude of Asian American stories to be told, allowing Jeong to avoid considerations of ‘ethnic storylines’ and prioritizing his personal interests.

My wife is Vietnamese and I’m Korean, and we’ll address some cultural issues, but we’ll do it very organically. We don’t do it the way white people want us to or think we do. That’s the worst...There’s never going to be a half-baked, stupid Asian bit, which would really bum me out because my life is not like that. I don’t talk like that. I’m in the writers’ room every day...I’m always the guardian of that.<sup>290</sup>

Jeong speaks from the experience of having been written by and for white writers, yet much of his work possesses a similar indefensibility. Although Jeong does not explicitly specify what, to him, is ‘a very hacky Asian joke’, it can be assumed that bits like accent-imitation take on a different meaning when the source is ‘inorganic’.

*Dr. Ken* illustrates what Eddie Huang was talking about when he spoke out against *Fresh Off the Boat* for watering down his life story to make for sanitised broadcast TV—while at the same time showing how unreasonably high his expectations were to begin with. Huang’s complaint about “reverse yellowface”—the reason he ultimately quit doing narration for *Fresh Off the Boat*—applies to *Dr. Ken*: The show is a formulaic sitcom that uses all the same tropes as white-centric sitcoms but scores “diversity points” by casting an Asian family.

This in and of itself is not necessarily a mark against the show: *Dr. Ken* takes place in 2015, whereas *Fresh Off the Boat* takes place in 1995 in a fictionalised version of Eddie Huang’s childhood. However, what *Dr. Ken* does illustrate is that while diversity on television has made significant strides in the last two decades, along the way, a huge part

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<sup>289</sup> Yang, 2015

<sup>290</sup> Yang, 2015

of the message of representation has been lost. The post-racial has subsumed the particularities of the Asian American experience and sidestepped the acknowledgement that minorities have struggles that are different from white people's, using the idea that 'not everything is about race' to deny minorities the opportunity to explore the realities of their existences without resorting to masking themselves as white.

The way Ansari and Jeong deploy their personal experiences affirms Lisa Lowe's conceptualization of the term Asian American as a beneficially politicised term. R. Radhakrishnan<sup>291</sup> and Espiritu<sup>292</sup> have written about embracing essentializing conceptions of Asian American identity in certain instances and, based on Ansari and Jeong's work, this approach is beginning to figure more prominently in the landscape of Asian American discourse. Lowe takes on the complex task of articulating reasons for employing strategic conceptions of ethnicity in certain instances. It becomes crucial to remain skeptical of essentialist categories such as Asian American as much contemporary readings of Asian America essentialises Asian American as a pure and fixed entity, when an affirmation of multiplicity, heterogeneity, and hybridity is what matters. Lowe suggests that the heterogeneous nature of identity, necessitates a reconception of Asian American identity as a "process through which minority groups organize and contest any specific hegemony" that would allow for a celebration of "ethnicity as a fluctuating composition of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities."<sup>293</sup> While problematizing essentialised identities is a major focus of her essay, Lowe nonetheless recuperates an authentic and essentialised notion of Asian American. Her problematization of the term thus becomes a strategic essentialism of it, refiguring 'Asian American' according to what Gayatri Spivak describes as "as a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest."<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, "Is the Ethnic 'Authentic' in the Diaspora?" *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* edited by Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston: South End Press, 1994): pp. 219-233.

<sup>292</sup> Yen Le Espiritu. *Asian American women and men: Labor, laws, and love*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2008

<sup>293</sup> "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora* 1:1 (1991):24-44.

<sup>294</sup> Gayatri Spivak. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York: Methuen, 1987: p. 205.

## Chapter Five: *Insecure* and *Atlanta*

On the 2nd of December 2016, self-described progressive weekly journal *The Nation* published a piece by Chinese American writer Wei Tchou dissecting the recent emergence of MTV News as a source of 'legitimate' critical writing and political/cultural reporting. The article's byline purported to offer "insights into twin trends across the media landscape: prestige and diversity."<sup>295</sup> Tchou positioned her reporting as critique of the deleterious effect that pigeonholing 'diversity hires' in new media outlets has on the quality of their writing content, using MTV's present corporate strategy as a case study. However, what the piece instead achieved was instant notoriety as an archetypal example of the insidious antiblackness ingrained within the consciousness of non-black peoples of colour. In attempting to dismantle what she sees as corporations' cynical hiring practices and the capitalist commodification of diversity, Tchou focused on three MTV writers – Ezekiel Kweku, Ira Madison, and Doreen St. Felix, all of whom identify as black – as symbols of tokenism, automatically dismissing the integrity of their writing by virtue of their perceived lack of pedigree. Despite their Ivy League backgrounds and prior employment at institutions of note, Tchou wrote off their cultural contributions as an insignificant manifestation of what she dubbed 'personal brand politics.'

Comparing them to the 'old guard' of journalism, Tchou wrote, "In the younger hires, however, legitimacy amounts to something different and less articulable: a well-oiled personal brand (today's stand-in for an intellectual perspective) and, especially, a popular Twitter following." On Twitter, the reaction was immediate. People, particularly members of the black community, criticised Tchou for her implicit and perhaps unconscious – but no less harmful – antiblackness and targeting of those who were in no position to actually enact change in the corporation's structure. Referring to a "reputational legitimacy [that] works its way from the bottom up" which "rewards how well a writer is able to promote his or her perspective to a specific audience", Tchou effectively denigrated the work put in by Kweku, Madison, and St. Felix as familiar iterations of an appeal to 'identity politics'.

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<sup>295</sup> Tchou, Wei. "The Rebirth of MTV News." *The Nation*, 9 Dec. 2016, [www.thenation.com/article/the-second-coming-mtv-news/](http://www.thenation.com/article/the-second-coming-mtv-news/).

Tchou implied that MTV News' efforts in putting together a diverse masthead comprising women and young people of colour are merely a surface-level response to concerns about the overwhelming whiteness of media and publishing; according to Tchou, the result of "hapless token hiring and lowering the bar of quality just to fulfill an undefined diversity quota" is an absence of good writing (by whose standards?), supplanted by "superficial riffs" driven by selfish interest. Tchou argued that their writing is a "toothless look at the world," devoid of historicised cultural and political reflection and interpretation. Much of Tchou's dismissal appears to stem from the writers' popularity on social media, as though that in itself were conclusive evidence of intellectual frivolity. What Tchou overlooks, whether intentionally or through ignorance, is the fact that black Americans must work harder to create platforms for themselves because access to conventional soapboxes are strictly guarded by the gatekeepers of whiteness. The fact that Tchou makes this oversight serves to highlight the proximity to whiteness enjoyed by Asian Americans. Thus far, this thesis has focused on what Asian Americans are doing with the platforms that they have, but it would be remiss and an incomplete account to discuss this without discussing the lack of similar ease of access given to black Americans to tell their story.

Tchou's contempt for identity-driven writing exemplifies a larger trend in contemporary American media, deep in the throes of post-election mania. As the ominous outline of Trump's America begins to take shape, many are seeking a scapegoat on which to pin the blame for the country's ongoing/impending fracture. It has emerged that the line that divides many is the term 'identity politics.' On the 18th of November 2016, the New York Times published a piece Columbia Professor Mark Lilla that decried the liberal focus on identity politics as the reason for Hillary Clinton's punishing loss.

Hillary Clinton was at her best and most uplifting when she spoke about American interests in world affairs and how they relate to our understanding of democracy. But when it came to life at home, she tended on the campaign trail to lose that large vision and slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop. This was a strategic

mistake. If you are going to mention groups in America, you had better mention all of them.<sup>296</sup>

Lilla's critique of the left's fixation on identity ignores the centuries-long default centering of whiteness as an identity. Clinton's appeal to those outside of those boundaries was an intentional and much-needed addressing of the invisibilization of minorities throughout the construction of America and American identity. Lilla's piece is but one of the many post-election reactions to the idea of diversity in America being a fundamentally divisive approach to politics and culture that contrast sharply with the cautiously optimistic writing that came in the wake of Obama's election as his ascent destabilised the hegemonic equation between blackness and Americanness in productive ways. As Anatol Lieven notes, "anyone" can be American, but "America" is simultaneously unattainable. Thus, one can adopt the purportedly unique qualities, including liberty, constitutionalism, law, democracy, individualism, and separation of church and state that are ostensibly defined and possessed by Americans, but "America" must also be bounded and protected from encroachment, danger, and oppositional values that could destroy its Anglo-Saxon core.<sup>297</sup>

In a post-election op-ed for the *New Yorker*, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote on the misperception of identity politics as a tool of division wielded by the left/minorities against the right/whites:

Identity politics is not the sole preserve of minority voters. This election is a reminder that identity politics in America is a white invention: it was the basis of segregation. The denial of civil rights to black Americans had at its core the idea that a black American should not be allowed to vote because that black American was not white. The endless questioning, before the election of Obama, about America's "readiness" for a black President was a reaction to white identity politics. Yet "identity politics" has come to be associated with minorities, and often with a patronizing undercurrent, as though to refer to nonwhite people motivated

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<sup>296</sup> Lilla, Mark. "The End of Identity Liberalism." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 Nov. 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html?mcubz=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html?mcubz=1).

<sup>297</sup> Lieven, Anatol. *America right or wrong: An anatomy of American nationalism*. Vol. 2012. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

by an irrational herd instinct. White Americans have practiced identity politics since the inception of America, but it is now laid bare, impossible to evade.<sup>298</sup>

Despite the prolonged collective disavowal of their own participation in identity politics, the politics of whiteness have come to the forefront in discussions of Trump's America. This is best illustrated by the rise in coverage of neo-Nazis, or what the mainstream media have tamely termed the 'alt-right'. This movement has long been around, but Trump's election has given them a new legitimacy in terms of the advancement of their own racial interests. For instance, Jared Taylor, an editor of the self-described 'race realism' website *American Renaissance*, wrote last year that when it comes to immigration, "white, high-IQ, English-speaking people obviously assimilate best, and someone in a Trump administration might actually say so. A Trump presidency could completely change...what it means to be an American."<sup>299</sup>

To ask why issues of identity dominated the 2016 campaign, and why they continue to ripple through the country in its destructive aftermath would be to wilfully deny the centrality of identity that shadowed President Barack Obama's campaign and presidency. Obama entered the White House in early 2009, in the midst of one of the worst crises in American history, brought about by the combined disasters of neoliberal financial deregulation and neoconservative militarism. Even prior to his election, it was Obama and not his main Democratic competitors, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards who became the standard-bearer of American exceptionalism: "I believe in American exceptionalism," he announced a month before the Iowa caucus in January 2008.<sup>300</sup>

Obama offered an inclusive vision of what American and Americans could be, using his own success to celebrate the country's meritocracy and as proof that racial division could be overcome through the gradual extension of liberal political equality. During his campaign, he argued that, "Our exceptionalism must be based on our

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<sup>298</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "Now Is the Time to Talk About What We Are Actually Talking About." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 19 June 2017, [www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/now-is-the-time-to-talk-about-what-we-are-actually-talking-about](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/now-is-the-time-to-talk-about-what-we-are-actually-talking-about).

<sup>299</sup> "Is Trump Our Last Chance?" *American Renaissance*, 8 Jan. 2017, [www.amren.com/features/2015/08/is-trump-our-last-chance/](http://www.amren.com/features/2015/08/is-trump-our-last-chance/).

<sup>300</sup> Jaffe, Greg. "Obama may have found a way to respond to criticism that he doesn't love America enough." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, [www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/?utm\\_term=.7cb20297f57a](http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2015/06/03/obama-and-american-exceptionalism/?utm_term=.7cb20297f57a).



Constitution, our principles, our values, and our ideals.”<sup>301</sup> However, what must be noted is that Obama invoked the exceptionalism of the United States less as a defensive action against rising Republican nationalism than as a defusing technique, a way to normalize his threatening self. In this way, his presidency was transformative. As the first black president, he has shown that the White House does not have to be the preserve of white men. This has both opened politics to a wider array of candidates and also produced a deep anxiety among conservative Americans about the changing demographics of the country. The rise of Trump, who first gained traction as a political figure because of his ‘birther’ questioning of Obama’s citizenship, has been part and parcel of the continued right-wing backlash against Obama.

Up to this point, this thesis has looked at shows that have challenged the idea of American identity as it has been typically conceived, and on the surface seem to be working towards Obama's new racial legacy in America - embracing and addressing America's complex history in ways that sitcoms have not typically been allowed to. Thus, the work being done by Asian Americans in mainstream media is not purely refutation of traditional ideals because they still have to work within the same, unyielding system. However, their contributions are part of a quiet and radical reshaping of the post-racial to underscore the idea that there is no 'natural' articulation of race, that varying interpretations of race means that in transmitting ideas of the post-racial, the meaning changes before it lands. No one show best defines the post-racial, because it's an ongoing straddling of the line of reckoning with the history of race and racialization, and wanting to simultaneously fulfil and belie the promise of the egalitarian American Dream.

This chapter will now look at two shows that refute the notion that mass appeal is preferable over prioritizing the specificity of lived experiences. What does it mean that this silence in Asian American culture exists? Black protest is necessarily loud, and a constant fight; Asian American protests and assertions of a nuanced humanity is read as an acquiescence to the status quo. If a show like *Atlanta* is, in a way, a culmination of black Americans getting tired and refusing to explain their blackness, what would it take to get Asian Americans to that point? Is it a useful parallel or does a different path need to be forged?

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<sup>301</sup> Jaffe, 2015

How do these shows challenge the idea of 'knowing' blackness? Is the same imposition/limitation of knowledge placed on whiteness? when the (white) gatekeeping is removed, how does our experience of blackness/Asianness/Otherness change? Can we conceive of a multitudinous blackness that doesn't depend on binarization with whiteness, or is there a (sublimated) precondition of understanding blackness that requires a not-ness?

### **From colourblindness to ignorance**

In studying the various modes of reproduction of the binaries of race in popular culture, particularly within the forced framework of the post-racial, scholars like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Leslie Carr, Ashley Doane, Tyrone Forman, and Charles Gallagher have provided significant insights through the lens of colourblindness<sup>302</sup>. This theory posits that strong institutionalization propels the dissemination of white power and privilege today in ways that are largely covert.<sup>303</sup>

The rhetoric of colourblindness began as a political tool of the Nixon presidential campaign in 1968. In the wake of the sweeping changes ushered in by the civil rights movement – namely the establishment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – white Americans' fear of racial upheaval and diminishing privileges was assuaged by “carefully selected symbols, rhetorical pronouncements, and ‘code words’” that promised the continuity of a familiar hierarchy.<sup>304</sup>

The colourblind framework subsumes group identity and difference in celebration of individual assimilation.<sup>305</sup> The reality of the lived minority experience has been

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<sup>302</sup> Eduardo, Bonilla-Silva. "Racism without Racists: Colour-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America." (2014); Carr, Leslie G. "Colourblind" Racism. Sage, 1997; Doane, Ashley. "What is racism? Racial discourse and racial politics." *Critical Sociology* 32.2-3 (2006): 255-274; Forman, Tyrone A. "COLOUR-BLIND RACISM AND RACIAL INDIFFERENCE: THE ROLE OF RACIAL APATHY IN FACILITATING ENDURING INEQUALITIES." *The changing terrain of race and ethnicity* (2004): 43; Gallagher, Charles. "Colour-blind egalitarianism as the new racial norm." *Theories of Race and Ethnicity: Contemporary Debates and Perspectives* (2015): 40-55.

<sup>303</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 2014.

<sup>304</sup> Turner, Sarah E., and Sarah Nilsen, eds. *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-racial America*. NYU Press, 2014: p. 2.

<sup>305</sup> In *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethnic Inequality and Public Policy* (1975), neoconservative thinker Nathan Glazer writes that "it is now our task to work with the intellectual, judicial, and political institutions of the country to re-establish the simple and clear understanding that rights attach to the individual, not the group, and that public policy must be exercised without distinction of race, colour, or national origin." Glazer, Nathan. *Affirmative discrimination: Ethnic inequality and public policy*. Harvard University Press, 1975: p. 221.

incidental to the promotion of colourblind values, resulting in significant repercussions to communities that are denied access to whiteness.<sup>306</sup> The public's conception of colourblind ideology is based on increased interracial understanding and reduced prejudice through a de-emphasizing of racial group differences. However, research on colourblindness has found strong associations with racist attitudes, denials of racism, and negative perceptions of antiracist policies. Studies have shown that colourblind ideology often negatively affects people of colour during interracial interactions, who reporting feelings of marginalization, discomfort, and invisibility in colourblind environments.<sup>307</sup>

Such analyses, in their prioritizing of everyday actors tend to emphasize "the structure of colourblindness"<sup>308</sup>, examining the habitual routines of 'ordinary' whites. The reproduction of racial inequality is given the attribution of 'unintentionality' – emphasizing the reinforcement of various social imbalances as a product of "business as usual," supported through underlying patterns of colourblind discourse. Examining these analyses productively reveals certain gaps in which whiteness acts with 'intentionality'. Heavily focusing on structure, though useful in providing insight into the machinations of the post-racial, primarily acts to conceal white complicity in reproducing, revising, and at times resisting white supremacy. Designating colourblindness as a new development – that is, historically distinct from other processes of the post-race – also obscures important continuities over time, such as the common rootedness of racial ideology in processes of ignorance.<sup>309</sup>

The production, maintenance, and reach of white ignorance as it is actively perpetuated in popular culture has yet to receive the same level of academic scrutiny that

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<sup>306</sup> For example, Ian Haney-Lopez traces the legal construction of whiteness through what he calls "prerequisite cases" - cases by people who would now be identified as Asian American or Latino who tried to claim citizenship based on "whiteness" but were denied access to whiteness and hence denied the right to naturalize as U.S. citizens. Haney-Lopez, Ian. *White by law: The legal construction of race*. NYU Press, 2006.

<sup>307</sup> See Holoien, Deborah Son, and J. Nicole Shelton. "You deplete me: The cognitive costs of colourblindness on ethnic minorities." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48.2 (2012): 562-565; Sasaki, Stacey J., and Jacquie D. Vorauer. "Ignoring Versus Exploring Differences Between Groups: Effects of Salient Colour-Blindness and Multiculturalism on Intergroup Attitudes and Behavior." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 7.4 (2013): 246-259; Rattan, Aneeta, and Nalini Ambady. "Diversity ideologies and intergroup relations: An examination of colourblindness and multiculturalism." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43.1 (2013): 12-21.

<sup>308</sup> Doane, Ashley W. "Shades of colourblindness: Rethinking racial ideology in the United States." *The colorblind screen: Television in post-racial America* (2014): 17.

<sup>309</sup> Mills, Charles W. *The racial contract*. Cornell University Press, 2007; Mills, Charles. "White ignorance." *Race and epistemologies of ignorance* 247 (2007).

colourblindness has in this 'post-racial' moment.<sup>310</sup> Ignorance, when conceived of "as the passive obverse of knowledge, the darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment"<sup>311</sup> present an unsolvable concern – how do you address the absent? How do you redress something that cannot present itself for rectification? Following the thread, this thinking of ignorance as the 'mere' lack of knowledge, so benignly described, stands in stark contrast to violence it engenders. The racial illiteracy ubiquitous in whites is unyielding, even "militant," like "an ignorance that resists . . . [and] fights back."<sup>312</sup> To think of ignorance, or more accurately white ignorance, as a byproduct of structurally induced habits is to deny that whites' persistent colourblindness is sustained by a vested commitment to defending the ideological buffer of not-knowing. Colourblindness is thus reconfigured as a culturally recursive accomplishment grounded in an epistemology of ignorance —that is a process of knowing purposefully designed to produce the not-knowing of white privilege, culpability, and structural white supremacy.

Academia has a history of deploying a range of concepts to distinguish and distance 'contemporary' (or perhaps more accurately 'benign'? 'incidental'?) racism from the more 'malicious' racism characterizing slavery and legal segregation, including laissez-faire racism<sup>313</sup>, aversive racism<sup>314</sup>, and symbolic racism<sup>315</sup>. In the tradition of critical race theory, however, the concept of colourblind racism holds prominence as a means of propping up a corresponding and distinct form of structural white supremacy. Of this concept, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes:

Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-civil rights era, colourblind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalised system in the

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<sup>310</sup> Turner, Sarah E., and Sarah Nilsen, eds. *The colorblind screen: Television in post-racial America*. NYU Press, 2014; Squires, Catherine R. *The post-racial mystique: Media and race in the twenty-first century*. NYU Press, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and Austin Ashe. "The end of racism? Colourblind racism and popular media." *The colorblind screen: Television in post-racial America* (2014): 57-83; Smith, Jason. "Between colourblind and colourconscious: Contemporary Hollywood films and struggles over racial representation." *Journal of Black studies* 44.8 (2013): 779-797; Shockley, Evie. "'Please feel free to perform the text': Making Slavery Work in a 'Colourblind' Era." *The Black Scholar* 47.1 (2017): 38-52.

<sup>311</sup> Mills, 2007.

<sup>312</sup> Mills, 2007, p. 13.

<sup>313</sup> Bobo, Lawrence, James R. Kluegel, and Ryan A. Smith. "Laissez-faire racism: The crystallization of a kinder, gentler, antiblack ideology." *Racial attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and change* 15 (1997): 23-5.

<sup>314</sup> Dovidio, John F., and Samuel L. Gaertner. "Aversive racism." *Advances in experimental social psychology* 36 (2004): 1-52.

<sup>315</sup> Henry, Patrick J., and David O. Sears. "The symbolic racism 2000 scale." *Political Psychology* 23.2 (2002): 253-283.

post-civil rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards.<sup>316</sup>

Colourblind framing allows for the attribution of ‘non-racial’ causes for racial disparities that are centered functionally toward ignoring the social structural dynamics of white supremacy.

Critics of colourblind discourse like Bonilla-Silva argue these everyday means reproduce racial disparities in an alleged era of formal equality, as the structurally recursive by-product of whites’ deeply internalised racial framing and white habitus. Despite invaluable insights, the singular structural focus may eclipse how whites use creative agency to reproduce, revise, and occasionally challenge white supremacy.

Hegemonic ideologies defend and maintain their dominance by denying the fact and mechanisms of that dominance. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana build on Mills’ work on “epistemologies of ignorance” to describe the socio-cognitive processes that distort and suppress whites’ capacity for “knowing” about matters of racism and white supremacy which results in ideological continuities across time.<sup>317</sup> Indeed, Mills suggests slavery and legal segregation required an epistemology that led to seeing “mythical race” as real—that is, explicit race consciousness supported explicitly disparate treatment. The structure of white supremacy today requires not seeing race, however—or at least not seeing it in the same way. Though disparate treatment continues to produce inequalities through the work of institutions and individuals alike, explanations now filter through ideological frames that better correspond to the post-civil rights normative climate. Today, race is regarded as “a characteristic of individuals” in a world where racism plays no meaningful role in resource distribution.<sup>318</sup>

In contrast to private/personal paths to knowing, epistemologies of ignorance are social epistemologies, structured into the rhythms of institutions and everyday practices that propel racial reproduction biases.<sup>319</sup> Researchers have increasingly moved toward

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<sup>316</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 2014, pp. 3-4.

<sup>317</sup> Sullivan, Shannon, and Nancy Tuana, eds. *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. SUNY Press, 2007.

<sup>318</sup> Doane, Ashley W. "Shades of colourblindness: Rethinking racial ideology in the United States." *The colorblind screen: Television in post-racial America* (2014): 17.

<sup>319</sup> Mills, 2007.

analyses examining how white people reproduce or resist colourblind logics.<sup>320</sup> This transitional shift from specificity in the enactment of racism – from analysing discrete frames, unique contexts, and varied groups where colourblindness appears, towards delineating causal mechanisms that produce, maintain, and occasionally transform racial ideologies and discourse – sidesteps overly simplified portraits of whiteness and a singular focus on the denial of racism, to develop more nuanced theories that recognize the fluid, evolving, and often contradictory claims of colourblindness. An epistemology of ignorance framing is useful because it is informed but not restricted by the structure of colourblindness, and instead highlights racial ideology as an ongoing, structurally recursive accomplishment instead; one that adapts and changes over time.

In *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), critical race theorist Derrick Bell uses an allegory to contemplate white ignorance. Bell imagines fictional weather disturbances which he terms ‘Racial Data Storms’ initiated by black scientists pouring down data onto American citizens, e.g. black disparities in employment, income, and education, life expectancies, imbalanced prison terms, and death sentences. The feelings that accompany oppression such as rage, horror, and despair would be present too. Bell uses a fictional antagonist to consider the question of whether “such brilliant manipulation of meteorology, statistics, and psychology” could make racial justice reform possible, and answers this query himself on with doubt:

I am far less certain . . . our long-held belief in education is the key to the race problem . . . [I]t’s hard for me to admit, but we fool ourselves when we argue that whites do not know what racial subordination does to its victims. Oh, they may not know the details of the harm, or its scope, but they know.<sup>321</sup>

In a world looming with racial disparities, resistance, and counter-framed critiques from people of colour, racial reproduction rests on whites’ ability to sustain and when necessary creatively defend hegemonic logics.

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<sup>320</sup> Burke, Meghan A. *Racial ambivalence in diverse communities: Whiteness and the power of colour-blind ideologies*. Lexington Books, 2012; Hughey, Matthew W., David G. Embrick, and Ashley “Woody Doane. “Paving the way for future race research: Exploring the racial mechanisms within a colour-blind, racialised social system.” (2015): 1347-1357; Maly, Michael, and Heather Dalmage. *Vanishing Eden: White Construction of Memory, Meaning, and Identity in a Racially Changing City*. Vol. 66. Temple University Press, 2015.

<sup>321</sup> Bell, 1992, p. 151.

The lens of racial ideology as process also clarifies important continuities across eras usually marked as dissimilar. Contemporary colourblindness is not about not seeing race any more than mythological race was about seeing 'real' racial difference.<sup>322</sup> Rather, colourblindness is about culturally sustaining an ignorance useful for cloaking and reproducing the contemporary structural mechanics of centuries of white supremacy. White people today continue in the tradition of performing everyday racism while maintaining their personal and corporate morality through ways of knowing that intentionally make murky this era's racial mechanisms which seek to preserve and sustain white power and privilege.

While there is much productivity to be gained in examining ignorance, and specifically white ignorance and its inherent violence, it once again centres whiteness in the construction of a raced self. It is for this reason that this chapter focuses instead on the inverse of this notion, turning the other from the unknown object into a subject complicit and purposeful in its shadowy self-making; from that which awaits unmasking to that which crafts a mask for its own benefit. For this, a turn to the work of Caribbean philosopher and critic Édouard Glissant's writing on opacity would be beneficial.

In Malian filmmaker and cultural theorist Manthia Diawara's film *Un monde en relation*, Glissant talks about having claimed the right to opacity in 1969 at a congress at the National Autonomous University of Mexico:

There's a basic injustice in the worldwide spread of the transparency and the projection of Western thought. Why must we evaluate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West? ... As far as I'm concerned, a person has the right to be opaque. That doesn't stop me from liking that person, it doesn't stop me from working with him, hanging out with him, etc. A racist is someone who refuses what he doesn't understand. I can accept what I don't understand.<sup>323</sup>

Explicating a recurring theme in his work, Glissant defends a lack of transparency as the fundamental prerequisite for the constitution of the Other, espousing a rejection of a central chamber of subjectivity that can be rationally known if only discovered. He uses

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<sup>322</sup> Mills, 1997.

<sup>323</sup> Diawara, Manthia. "One World in Relation Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara." *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2011.28 (2011): 4-19.

the word "opacity" to describe the status of the Other in 'our' confrontation with 'them'. The choice is between embracing the conditions of opacity as the basis for an ethical relationship, or working tirelessly to overcome opacity through knowing the other, whether through violence or the accumulation of knowledge (often both).<sup>324</sup> The notion of opacity is instructive as Glissant provides a mode of engagement with past trauma that neither fully disavows the meaning of the historical fact of suffering nor identifies completely with the facticity of memory and an inability to move beyond the reality of that suffering. This articulates new modes of subjectivisation that provide an escape from the false choice between total rootedness and rootlessness.

Within the idea of opacity, the difference between being made invisible and invisibilising is where Glissant's interests and the aims of this thesis intersect. Where being made invisible comes at the hands of an external actor, a centered identity around which others are expected to revolve and to which they must differ, invisibilising offers a reclamation of agency for the other for whom being seen means unwelcome exposure that demands a performance of revelation, of granting access to the self-unknown. This access presumes the always-present possibility of crossing the threshold from the obscured to the understood. In conceiving of the encounter with the other, Glissant indicates the insufficiency of relativizing difference and instead proposes that what is 'ethical' – or what is ethics – is subject to reinvention through the acts of changing/exchanging. The unforeseeable is foregrounded.

If the iterations of visibilities evoked in previous chapters are considered, there is a recurring fascination with, if not the elision of difference, then the forward drive to synthesize/recuperate seemingly at-odds difference into a comprehensible new form. For Glissant instead, when he writes about 'creolization', he conceives of the encounter not as an end in itself but a process in which difference functions as a constitutive reality, provoking new modes of thought and action. The shows I have analysed thus far have focused on fading the moment of difference, reaching across various borders and boundaries to exclaim at the malleability of the self when confronted with discovery.

In applying Glissant's theorizing of difference to the work of this thesis, analyses are taking place at different registers. Glissant invokes the other in a particular grounding

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<sup>324</sup> Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of relation*. University of Michigan Press, 1997: p. 62.



of the specificities of Caribbean culture. Taken from the context of Caribbean history, Glissant's ideas are applicable in thinking about non/untranslatable experiences that seem like new televisual modes. It is useful also to consider how this application complicates the idea of television as being easily read and intended for wide access.

Analysing *Insecure* and *Atlanta*, it is clear that each show and their respective creators tackle the notion of white ignorance – addressing in ways both direct and indirect the idea of a benign absence of knowledge that is intentionally produced by not-seeing. Glissant's notion of the right to opacity provides a point of departure for thinking about what it means to be not-known – how do we know blackness? Who is we? When we talk about obscuring the knowledge of a person, a body, a people, their bodies, from which vantage point do we imagine we are viewing them? Glissant's work has been used in relation to the challenge of surveillance – how does whiteness position itself to surveil, judge, and categorize non-whiteness? And when we speak of not-knowing a thing, why do we presume an identical point of origin for the construction and addition of information?

With these shows, both Glover and Rae contribute to the construction of canon of not-knowing – producing art that highlights and cements the viewers' ignorance and engineers a confrontation of this absence of knowledge – within specific circles. When we say something is not known, who do we presume is doing the knowing? How do we reconcile vast swathes of knowledge present in minority communities that is not translated – nor translatable – to white media audiences with what is defined as cultural gaps? The black linguistic and aesthetic vocabulary both shows employ can be read as an intentional confrontation of the idea that to be seen is to be known – playing with the notion of obfuscation through representation. How does one feel solidarity without 'grasping' – empathizing without identifying?

The shows that previously discussed and analysed in this thesis work on the idea that knowing is an inherent benefit and purpose of representation. Knowledge in itself, of communities, of people other than the centered self (in media context often white audiences) is presumed to be valuable – whether as a means of reducing prejudice or adding to trivial information. But what can be said of intentionally using un-seenness, of reclaiming not invisibility but un-visibility – engaging in a purposeful drawing out and

drawing in of the boundaried self? In the current moment of black hypervisibility, Glover and Rae's work speak to Glissant's call to self-obfuscation as means of engaging with the pockets of absence that erupt within an epistemology of not-knowing.

### Issa Rae and *Insecure*

It took me a while to realize that the way I am is black. That being black is not just one thing. That no one could define my blackness, that I could make my own definitions of blackness. I can't pinpoint the exact moment that happened, but I do know that realizing I don't need to be limited instilled in me a new confidence.<sup>325</sup>

— Issa Rae

After a number of false starts, independent producer Issa Rae — who forged an industry career creating innovative online content with the YouTube series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*<sup>326</sup> and fostering a host of other projects under her Colour Creative initiative — found a home for her show *Insecure* on HBO<sup>327</sup> in 2016, as well as a first-look production deal with the same company. Like *Awkward Black Girl*,

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<sup>325</sup> Glamour. "Insecure's Issa Rae on Defining Her Own Blackness: 'Being Black Is Not Just One Thing'." *Glamour*, Glamour Magazine, 14 Sept. 2016, [www.glamour.com/story/hbo-insecure-issa-rae](http://www.glamour.com/story/hbo-insecure-issa-rae).

<sup>326</sup> A nuanced look at being black, clumsy and curious, the show drew over 25 million views and hundreds of thousands of subscribers over the course of its run.

<sup>327</sup> Jennifer Fuller discusses how in the 1990s and 2000s, HBO and other cable networks branded themselves in strategic ways in order to challenge the dominance of broadcast network, with a decision to actively undertake 'risk' as a calculated economic approach. Joseph Turow notes that Hollywood tends to be risk averse and big changes often occur only in moments of crisis or turnover in leadership. However, in terms of programming, risk is a way to draw an audience and earn critical attention. A conspicuously risky series makes viewers feel as though the network is taking a chance with content for their benefit. Thus, in an era of network programming that excluded people of colour from leading and supporting roles — culminating in the proposed network boycott of 1999 — HBO and other cable networks offered a risky alternative: racial diversity. Fuller, Jennifer. "Branding blackness on US cable television." *Media, Culture & Society* 32.2 (2010): 285-305. Kristal Brent Zook coined the term the "Fox Formula" to refer to a similar strategy undertaken by network television. Start-up networks such as Fox, the WB, and UPN would narrowcast their programming to black viewers in the hopes of connecting interested advertisers to this niche demographic. However, once the network found itself stable enough to switch its focus to the primary demographic of young urban whites, programming targeted at the black community was either shunted and corralled to one night a week or cancelled entirely. The disappearance of black shows from the 1990s Big Four network television schedules and reappearance on cable is part of a pattern of risk as an operational logic rather than an attempt at positive programming. Herman Gray makes this point when he posits that, Black shows, where they were developed at all, were and are selectively deployed by major commercial networks as part of their overall marketing and branding strategy, a strategy and ideal demographic that in all likelihood does not include black people as a prime market. It is therefore neither goodwill nor a belief in equity that define when networks take on black shows; rather, that they serve a purpose in establishing – or reestablishing – a brand through calculated risk. Zook, Kristal Brent. *Colour by Fox: The Fox network and the revolution in Black television*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

*Insecure* follows Rae as a young black woman (also named Issa) as she navigates life, love, and work in Los Angeles.

The show represents an expression of creative freedom rarely granted to black artists, much less championed for, whereby the perceived black monolith is decoded. Blackness is the greatest envoy of culture in America, yet this fact is denied recognition throughout history as cultural blackness is disseminated and diluted in the mainstream. In consideration of a President-elect who openly advocates for white supremacist values, and after eight years with the country's first black president, it is more urgent than ever for black media makers to be given space to create content on mainstream platforms that complicates notions of race and the racism upon which those notions thrive.

The show debuted at a point in history where, though the field has existed for some time, critical whiteness studies is having a profound impact on how race is discussed.<sup>328</sup> Critical whiteness studies, though not yet named as such, originates in the works scholars from W.E.B. Dubois to James Baldwin, who, alongside other black scholars have been interrogating the operations and prevalence of whiteness in American society.<sup>329</sup> Ignatiev and Garvey argue that “treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity”<sup>330</sup>, of which then follows that to be loyal to whiteness is to betray one’s own humanity and that of others. Therefore, engaging with whiteness on a lived and cultural level necessitates conscious and subconscious interrogations of the phenomenon of whiteness, how it is manifested and maintained. Reading *Insecure* through this lens, it becomes apparent that while whiteness is indeed indicative of white folks, people of colour can also inhabit the ideology of whiteness, albeit for different reasons.

At multiple levels of *Insecure*’s construction, the series toys with this notion of loyalty and betrayal by appearing to speak to two audiences simultaneously: from its playfully inclusive title (often discussion in juxtaposition with Lena Dunham’s normatively, prohibitively white *Girls*), to the visual landscape that for rescues South Los

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<sup>328</sup> Allen, R. L. (2001). The globalization of white supremacy: Toward a critical discourse of the racialization of the world. *Educational Theory* 51(4), 467–485; Gillborn, D. (2006). Rethinking white supremacy: Who counts in “whiteworld.” *Ethnicities*, 6(3), 318–340; Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, whiteness, and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>329</sup> . Fanon (1967) argues that whiteness leads the white man to believe he is the “predestined master of the world” (p. 128), a process that corrupts the “soul of the white man” (p. 129). Hooks (1994) claims that naturalizing whiteness and Otherizing people of colour leads whites to believe that “there is no representation of whiteness as terror or terrorizing” (p. 45).

<sup>330</sup> Ignatiev, Noel, and John Garvey, eds. *Race traitor*. Psychology Press, 1996: p. 10.

Angeles from boxed-in portrayals as gang ridden and violent, to the dimensional characterization of the leads. This type of bilingual audience address is not a new phenomenon for black-centered productions. Rather, this act of bifurcating messages of universality and cultural specificity between two audiences is a long-running and crucial survival tactic in an industry that does not often allow marginalised groups access or entry.

Much of *Insecure* then, takes on the mantle of subtly underscoring Mills's notion of white ignorance. The show acknowledges that whites often do not have to learn about the world around them or the cultural groups they have dislodged because their privilege insulates them from responsibility or accountability for those outcomes. Minorities on the other hand, whether of the racial, sexual, or gendered sort, have no option but educate themselves on the norms, narratives, and social practices of whites as a matter of survival. Speaking on the black experience, Mills points out "blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists, studying the strange culture, customs, and mind-set of the 'white tribe' that has such frightening power over them, that in certain time periods can even determine their life or death on a whim."

Rae's work on *Insecure* challenges audiences to rethink "ignorance" as a passive phenomenon of simple lack of education or access but instead as a deliberate tactic which extends white supremacy and privilege into a culture of knowledge. as whites forcefully disremember and rewrite the world according to their own understandings, they simultaneously change the rules of engagement for everyone else. white ignorance is a willful act, a purposeful not knowing, an intentional misunderstanding of actual people, places, and things, it is a strategic tool that not only places marginalised groups at risk for physical and emotional violence. The show's forces culpability into the hands of white and non-black audiences by refusing to engage in acts of translation, thus turning ignorance on its head.

In the series, Rae's protagonist works for a largely white organization called "We Got Y'all," which undertakes outreach to young students of colour. The pilot episode begins with the predominantly black students under Issa's purview critiquing her blackness.<sup>331</sup> Moments of cultural specificity arise with jokes about educated black

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<sup>331</sup> Rae, Issa, prod. "Insecure As Fuck." *Insecure*. HBO: 9 October 2016. DVD.

women loving Drake because he ‘gets’ them, as well as Issa’s affinity for freestyle rapping to trap music. However, most of the problems Issa has — fear of “settling,” a fight with her best friend, general millennial insecurity — prove to be universal and generational.

Yet, as the episode progresses, the viewer becomes aware of the racial specificity that settles in and is allowed to take up more space within *Insecure*’s narrative. The series takes on intertextual references (e.g. a ‘Black Twitter’ joke about co-showering that posits women’s showers are too hot for men). The further away the show gets from the pilot, the less often cultural codes of blackness are translated for a non-black audience. For example, when Issa and her best friend Molly (Yvonne Orji) meet up with friends to attend an Alpha Phi Alpha’s graduate chapter fraternity party, there are no explanations of black Greek culture or the expectations therein.

In the foreword to *Black Cultural Traffic*, Tricia Rose tethers black cultural traffic to the trafficking of black bodies, noting similar trade routes, uneven exchanges, and a singular focus on capital gain.<sup>332</sup> Rose links the history of the slave trade and its ramifications to the complex evolution of trafficking in the modern world, leading to what she calls an endless paradox that ensnares the interpreters of black cultures: “black culture has been both an enduring symbol of unchanging purity, in full and complete opposition to white, western normalcy and yet a highly celebrated example of cutting-edge change, dynamism, and innovation.”<sup>333</sup> This reception and interpretation of black culture as both uniquely and ‘authentically’ black, but also edgy and new, facilitates the kind of movement and consumption of cultural authenticity examined by Rae (and Glover). For a black cultural artifact to be successfully trafficked it must be “recognised as black...and yet also be newly black.”<sup>334</sup>

Although in many ways *Insecure* is aware of the high-wire act that it is undertaking, against its own volition, on occasion that awareness becomes occluded by a natural bent towards wanting to be understood that ends up reifying old structures of white supremacy. For example, executive producer Melina Matsoukas recently suggested that the show is

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<sup>332</sup> Rose, Tricia, in Elam, Harry Justin, and Kennell A. Jackson, eds. *Black cultural traffic: Crossroads in global performance and popular culture*. University of Michigan Press, 2005: p. vii.

<sup>333</sup> Rose, 2005, vii

<sup>334</sup> Rose, 2005, vii

helpful in the way that when you watch it, you see the most basic thing which is black people are human! And have the same experiences as everybody else. With this show, it's an opportunity to take your mind off of things, and realize at the end of the day we are all the same.<sup>335</sup>

In public discussions about the show, Rae seems invested in arguing that while blackness is foregrounded within the series, it still does not fit in neat categories, but rather adapts to the personality one brings to it. Would the same assertions of breadth and diversity need to be made if this were a white show? Likely not, and as a result, tensions emerge as the audience seeks comfort through the split lens of universality and cultural specificity.

The labour of selling a series as suitable for everyone is expected from marginalised bodies if they desire to reach a mainstream audience. Similar series with predominately white casts are not expected to sell themselves as universal and relatable because they always already operate within the normative and authentic standards by which the human experience is judged. Following in the footsteps of colourblind casting — where race is not written into a script and the parts are rarely adjusted for actors of colour — the burden falls upon the person of colour to perform his or her homogeneity in order to ensure that the preferred demographic is not alienated.

As Jenna Wortham documents in a 2015 *New York Times* profile of Rae, this fear of alienation means that the early development stages of the series were fraught.<sup>336</sup> After approving the script she co-wrote with Larry Wilmore, Rae hired Matsoukas to direct the pilot. However, HBO made its presence felt immediately by rejecting Rae's writer's room — filled with young women of colour — as 'lacking experience'. The network ultimately elected to make those decisions for itself, leaving the hiring of directors and producers to Rae as a compromise. Rae's positionality as a black female showrunner was thus somewhat tenuous as she walked the fine line necessary for a successful series launch. It is tricky for creative laborers of colour in the film and television industries because they rarely have much choice but to embrace a rhetoric of sameness that not only obfuscates their unequal professional footing but can also encourage them to shed their sense of

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<sup>335</sup> N'Duka, Amanda. "'Insecure' Creator & Star Issa Rae: No 'Universal Way To Be Black' – TCA." *Deadline*, 30 July 2016, [deadline.com/2016/07/insecure-issa-rae-no-universal-way-to-be-black-tca-1201795585/](https://deadline.com/2016/07/insecure-issa-rae-no-universal-way-to-be-black-tca-1201795585/).

<sup>336</sup> Wortham, Jenna. "The Misadventures of Issa Rae." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 4 Aug. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/magazine/the-misadventures-of-issa-rae.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/magazine/the-misadventures-of-issa-rae.html).

socio-historical specificity. In certain cases, they must not only create work that crosses over to a (white) mainstream audience but often must disavow elements of their racial identity to ensure steady employment.

*Insecure* circumvents the trend of colourblind casting with characterization that allows for mainstream identification on the surface but also dimensionalises the portrayals so these characters have depth outside of their narrative functions. The three leads, Issa, Molly, and Issa's ex-boyfriend Lawrence (Jay Ellis), all develop in ways that illustrate shape and an active fleshing out of character while still being carved out of varied black experiences. In episode three of the series, Molly's storyline concerns the space she is afforded to explore her multiplicities through the show's non-judgmentalness of her code-switching--white people love her, black people love her.<sup>337</sup> She moves between her law office and Inglewood; switching between loud, brashness with Issa and hushed tones in her mostly white office. This approach is challenge by a new hire at her workplace. Molly strikes up a friendship with Rasheeda, a younger black lawyer at her law firm, whose comfort with herself and belief that her white bosses accept her informal vernacular register translates to her presenting as the 'loud black woman'. In comparison, Molly code switches and fights for the visibility of her good work when she is more frequently passed over. Rather than reducing this to a fight based solely on respectability politics, both women are given the opportunity to make valid points about best practices for navigating a white workplace.

Rae is aware of the position *Insecure* occupies in the present cultural canon and has specific ideas about how she wants the show to be discussed. In a recent interview with The Guardian, Rae says:

I don't want the stench of the current administration on this show. I don't want people to look back and be like: 'Oh, this was a Trump show.' I want them to look back and say *Insecure* was an Obama show. Because it is: Obama enabled this show. Culturally, Obama made blackness so present, and so appreciated; people felt seen and heard; it influenced the arts, and it absolutely influenced how I see

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<sup>337</sup> Rae, Issa, prod. "Racist As Fuck." *Insecure*. HBO: 23 October 2016. DVD.

blackness, how I appreciate it. When a black president is a norm, it enables us to be, too.<sup>338</sup>

Being a norm is a matter of some import to the actor and writer, who – in spite of her personal allegiances – had no desire to make an overtly political show. For Rae, *Insecure* is not about “the struggle” or “the dramatic burdens of being black”.

I just wanted to see my friends and I reflected on television, in the same way that white people are allowed, and which nobody questions. Nobody watches *Divorce* [another HBO show, starring Sarah Jessica Parker] and asks: ‘What is the political element, what is the racial element driving this?’<sup>339</sup>

But “a show about regular black people being basic” is so rare in contemporary entertainment that despite Rae’s insistence on ‘normalcy’, *Insecure* has nonetheless been hailed as revolutionary. The whiteness of the present media landscape means that Rae herself cannot help but find ‘the political/racial element’ in her creative output.

Somewhere along the way [on film and television], being white became seen as ‘relatable’, and you started to see people of colour only reflected as stereotypes or specific archetypes. So much of the media now presents blackness as being cool, or able to dance, or fierce and flawless, or just out of control; I’m not any of those things.<sup>340</sup>

Part of the on-screen Issa’s insecurity – of feeling “not black enough for black people and not white enough for white people” – is, Rae says, “something that I have been called out for by kids in my life. I’ve experienced a real sense of feeling out of place.” Rae’s awareness of the show’s position as a cultural artifact in the age of Trump has the effect of undercutting its more thoughtful explorations of the nuances of black lives in favour of framing a new, oppositional ‘normal’ that can regress into a flattening of those experiences. A season two storyline about oral sex exemplifies this. Issa, Molly, and their friends Tiffany (Amanda Seales) and Kelli (Natasha Rothwell) attend a sex positive

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<sup>338</sup> Mulkerrins, Jane. “Issa Rae: ‘So much of the media presents blackness as fierce and flawless. I’m not’.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Aug. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/aug/05/issa-rae-media-presents-blackness-fierce-flawless-insecure](http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/aug/05/issa-rae-media-presents-blackness-fierce-flawless-insecure).

<sup>339</sup> Mulkerrins, 2017

<sup>340</sup> Mulkerrins, 2017



workshop called 'Sexplosion' in the hopes of getting some toys and having a good time.<sup>341</sup> Tiffany suggests they sign up for a 'blow-job class' to learn more about the act. Although she is quick to note that she is so good at it she should teach the class, she proves to be an outlier.

Kelli does not engage in providing oral sex; Molly will reciprocate if a man initiates but she is not enthusiastic about it; Issa outright rejects it saying she finds oral sex "too intimate," and openly admits that she is not good at it. She seems to extrapolate from her personal experience to make the sweeping statement that black women are automatically seen as disposable if they give oral sex. If there was something that undercut this conversation — like another black woman at the seminar interrupting to highlight how oddly regressive the idea that black women do not discuss or perform blow-jobs is — that would be one thing. But nothing about the writing of this episode feels fresh, layered, or fully considerate of the modern sexual mores of black women. In the after-show segment "Wine Down," Issa Rae spoke with actor Jay Ellis, who plays Lawrence. "Early on this was something I wanted in this season[...]," she says. "One, oral sex is such a contentious subject for black women especially versus white women."<sup>342</sup> For whom Rae is speaking here is unclear.

It is also troubling that black women are framed as sexual prudes when compared to white women. What the conversation — and Issa's reaction to Daniel's accidental ejaculation in the episodes closing scene — underscores is not just a false pronouncement of black women's prudishness, it reveals some tired respectability politics bubbling underneath the surface. *Insecure* often succeeds at depicting a swath of upwardly mobile Los Angeles black folk, but it lacks an interest in exploring queer black life and anything beyond the basics when it comes to the sex its characters have.

There is a tension between the show's aims as a show about 'regular black people being basic' and wanting to be a norm - because what is regular and what is the norm are not objective facts. Debates about authenticity are played out, certainly, but when blackness and black people have historically been denied the option of being 'regular' in

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<sup>341</sup> Rae, Issa, prod. "Hella Blows." *Insecure*. HBO: 27 August 2017. DVD.

<sup>342</sup> Bastien, Angelica Jade. "Why *Insecure*'s Blow-Job Scene Felt Out of Step With the Typically Radical Show." *Vulture*, 28 Aug. 2017, [www.vulture.com/2017/08/insecure-blowjob-scene-felt-weirdly-regressive.html](http://www.vulture.com/2017/08/insecure-blowjob-scene-felt-weirdly-regressive.html).

popular culture, it is crucial that what is positioned - or what positions itself - as the new normal be interrogated for its own exclusivity. The show excels in its exploration of othering when it refrains from overly explicating those experiences for the audience and instead allowing the camera to focus on the characters' interiority, mediating-without-translating.

In episode four of the show's second season, titled 'Hella LA', Lawrence has a run-in with law enforcement, the show's first such scene to address this aspect of citizenship as experience by black people.<sup>343</sup> Driving to meet his friends at a party, he gets stuck in traffic and makes an illegal U-turn. Although he is merely following suit of several cars before him, he is the only one who is caught and made to be pulled over by the police. As the officer walks over to his car, Lawrence begins to take steps to reduce the threats of his body and to his body. He changes the radio station from rap/hip-hop to pop; his body language becomes more measured, hands carefully positioned on the steering wheel; he rearranges his facial expression into an approximation of neutrality (necessary but perhaps futile given the ways in which aggression is read onto black male bodies regardless of their posture). Though these details are seemingly minor, their very practicedness reveals volumes: Lawrence has done this before, in the show's many unseen moments. The character's offscreen life is drawn into sharp focus as the audience watches him run through the motions that could save him.

The mundanity of these gestures and motions belie the real fears that drive them. The price of behaving 'badly' – for example, listening to the 'wrong' type of music or failing to strike the properly deferential tone of voice – is a high one for black people, and even then 'appropriate' behaviour is no guarantee of safety or the recognition of one's basic humanity. *Insecure* being a comedy, the audience knows that it is unlikely that anything truly terrible will happen to this character, but this scene is still approached with the knowledge that danger is folded into every interaction between black Americans and the police. It is a moment that subtly divides the audience between those registering recognition drawing a veil around this experience from those protected from this painful familiarity by the colour of their skin.

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<sup>343</sup> Rae, Issa, prod. "Hella LA." *Insecure*. HBO: 13 August 2017. DVD.

The police officer begins asking questions about the traffic violation that just transpired and Lawrence answers dutifully, ostensibly toeing the line between innocent lightheartedness and impertinent levity. The cop does not appear to respond in kind, and at the end of his line of questioning says that he should bring Lawrence in. Taken aback and visibly worried, Lawrence asks why and appears to steel himself for a confrontation, when the officer references a decal on Lawrence's car which shows that the men support opposing sports teams. The relief that flashes on Lawrence's face is real, but the show, and Jay Ellis's acting pushes this further by allowing resentment, anger, and confusion to bubble to the surface too as it registers with Lawrence that what for him was a fraught, potentially fatal encounter, was to the white officer nothing more than a routine stop involving no such similar emotional gymnastics.

After Lawrence is pulled over, he then encounters two women – one white, one half-Asian – at a liquor store who proposition him with a threesome. As the three of them become intimate, the women quickly grow callous and act as if Lawrence is not even in the room. Spontaneous sexual encounters can often feel transactional, even impersonal, but this is more than that. It is hard not to draw a line from Lawrence being pulled over by an overeager, older white cop and the way he is fetishised in the threesome. Both experiences are predicated on the ways the black male body is interpreted as either a threat or vehicle for a pleasure. In both instances, Lawrence is not so much a person, but a symbol and tool. The writers subtly draw parallels between the lust these women initially have for Lawrence and how easily they dehumanize him later. However, there is also a complex history simmering beneath the surface of this scene's uncomfortable humour: the noxious stereotypes attached to black men's sexual performance.

The Mandingo stereotype — which suggests black men are sexually aggressive and capably skilled in that department — is a pervasive cultural belief that is meant to suggest that black men are primitive and driven by their sexual urges. In "Hella LA," the episode's writers do not make this history blatant, but it is there underneath the surface of the women's casual disregard of Lawrence's humanity, and his growing discomfort and inability to say anything about it. Ellis nails the mix of shock, bewilderment, and discomfort these scenes call for.

Closing off the Guardian interview, Rae says,

I didn't create this show for white people, I didn't create it for men; I created it, really, for my friends and family, and for their specific sense of humour. But now that we know we have an audience – including HBO executives – the double consciousness comes into play, because you're always wondering: 'How do they see what I am writing?' Are they laughing at this specific joke for this particular reason? "When season one aired, I had Asian women coming up to me on the street, saying: 'Oh my gosh, this reminds me of me and my best friend.' And that's wonderful – that's what you want for a show – but you are always wondering: 'What elements do they relate to the most?'

While a different show might have followed the threesome with a scene of Lawrence debriefing with friends, these ideas are left to the audience to parse, once again folding an experience fraught with racial trauma into a slice-of-lifeness that makes it all the more jarring.

The experiences that Lawrence goes through factor into the everyday black imagination. The black imagination articulates the terror of experiencing and witnessing the realities of racism. Bell hooks, for example, describes a terrifying childhood event: not knowing the many door-to-door white salesmen who entered her home would commit acts of white supremacy. Their racial discomfort in the presence of blackness was difficult to read and hook says, "their presence terrified me" because she could not distinguish between the white men selling products and those who might "enact rituals of terror and torture."<sup>344</sup> This terror manifests in the present day through the witnessing of murders of black people in America (e.g. Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Charleena Lyles, and Tanisha Anderson). The result is a collective black imagination that, far from essentializing black identity, recognises that terror, accompanied by certain intuitions and behaviours, is a rational response to living under white supremacy

In the hands of white supremacy, people of colour are most desirable when they are reduced to their traumas. The narrative of trauma appeals to whiteness because they arrive to it after the fact; the origin of the trauma is glossed over and/or dehistoricised – "it was those other white people" - and it is the potential for a redemptive arc that white-constructed narratives seek, the idea that the long moral arc of the universe is

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<sup>344</sup> Hooks, Bell. *Black looks: Race and representation*. Academic Internet Pub Inc, 2006: p. 36.

reaching/has reached its post-racial plateau. Resisting white supremacy means insisting that people of colour are more than their traumas and asserting an individual's right not to identify or be identified simply by one facet of his or her personal history/mosaic.

### **Donald Glover and *Atlanta***

We never wanted the show to feel important...It never really was our goal to make people feel like, 'Oh, I'm going to see everyday blackness,' even though you probably will. It's interesting, watching it with a crowd yesterday, we got huge laughs in parts where I was like, "Wow, I always felt like this show was kind of slow." A lot of things move in real time on our show. So, it was cool that these people relate and actually laugh like it was *Bridesmaids* or something.<sup>345</sup>

#### **--- Donald Glover**

In one of many surreal moments in Donald Glover's new series on FX *Atlanta*, chronic underachiever Earnest "Earn" Marks (played by Glover) is riding the bus home with his baby daughter. Tired and half asleep, he meets a man in a suit and bowtie who says to him, "Ya mind's racing. Tell me, young." Without questioning how this man could know his inner state, or perhaps if he is even real or the figment of a weary psyche, Earn confesses his exhaustion, "I just keep losing." Listening without speaking, the man starts spreading Nutella over slices of bread before telling Earn that resistance is a symptom of the way things are but not the way they should be. Earn balks at this, which the man ignores and to which he simply replies, "Bite this sandwich," before disappearing off the bus and walking into the bushes.

That one scene, unfolding in the series' first half hour, encapsulates the dreamy world of *Atlanta*. In the show's titular city, everyday is galvanised by a kind of magical realism that makes the ordinary experience of black living extraordinary. However, that dreaminess is paired with an inescapable feeling of exhaustion and a sense of incredulity over what is happening before you.

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<sup>345</sup> Richardson, Nikita. "Donald Glover:" *Fast Company*, Fast Company, 26 Apr. 2017, [www.fastcompany.com/3063281/donald-glover-we-never-wanted-atlanta-to-feel-important](http://www.fastcompany.com/3063281/donald-glover-we-never-wanted-atlanta-to-feel-important).

This vein of surreality that grounds the real recalls a moment in the film Edouard Glissant: *One World in Relation* in which Glissant uses his hatred of broccoli as a point of departure to critique psychoanalysis.

Everyone likes broccoli, but I hate it. But do I know why? Not at all. I accept my opacity on that level. Why wouldn't I accept it on other levels? Why wouldn't I accept the Other's opacity? Why must I absolutely understand the Other in order to live next to him and work with him? That's one of the laws of Relation. In Relation, elements don't blend just like that, don't lose themselves just like that. Each element can keep its – I won't just say its autonomy but also its essential quality, even as it accustoms itself to the essential qualities and differences of others. (Quoted in Diawara)

The heart of Glissant's ethical project is thus: the right to opacity, which Glissant outlines here as a right to remain inscrutable to oneself and to others while still remaining open to being affected by human interaction. Opacity here becomes a strategy of resistance that works against discourses that attempt to render subjects transparent. Glissant makes clear that the right of opacity is more foundational than the right to difference, as it is first a right against the slave master's push of transparency against the enslaved people. It is a right of language and culture, and taken to the furthest point of its conclusion, it is the right not to be understood, not to be reduced to epistemic violence of comprehension and judgement.<sup>346</sup>

Opacity, then, for Glissant, is vast and robust. It is at ethical, political, aesthetic, and ontological. "Opaqueness is a positive value to be opposed to any pseudo-humanist attempt to reduce us to the scale of some universal model . . . that which protects the Diverse we call opacity." Glissant also distinguishes opacity from difference, in that opacity exceeds the terrain of identity and identification, and argues that Western thought's pathological demand for understanding is underwritten by hierarchies and a

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<sup>346</sup> Saidiya Hartman furthers this analysis in *Scenes of Subjection*: Rather than consider black song as an index or mirror of the slave condition, this examination emphasises the significance of opacity as precisely that which enables something in excess of the orchestrated amusements of the enslaved and which similarly troubles distinctions between joy and sorrow and toil and leisure. For this opacity, the subterranean and veiled character of slave song must be considered in relation to the dominative imposition of transparency and the degrading hypervisibility of the enslaved, and therefore, by the same token, such concealment should be considered a form of resistance. Furthermore, as Glissant advises, "the attempt to approach a reality so hidden from view cannot be organised in terms of a series of clarifications." The right to obscurity must be respected . . . (p. 36)

“requirement of transparency.” He writes that acceptance is contingent upon “[measuring] your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments.” He calls for doing away with “the scale,” which can conceivably refer to measure, classification, and categorization.

Defying categorization has seemed to be the goal of Donald Glover’s career. In a poem posted to his (now-deleted) Twitter account in 2014, Donald Glover writes of his hip-hop alter ego, ‘Childish Gambino is a white rapper.’<sup>347</sup> This facetious accusation is one that has dogged Glover’s work since his first foray into music, where he often claimed that he wrote for others like him: black kids who found themselves the only ones ‘at a Sufjan Stevens concert’. Childish Gambino started out as an act that appealed to those in the know, but has since gained significant mainstream popularity, at which point Glover announced a hiatus from music-making, claiming a reluctance to be pigeonholed; to be too-known. It is this simultaneous desire to be seen and desire to control the parameters of that visibility that has marked the work of an artist and writer often dismissed pandering to white audiences. After several years of musical silence, during which Glover expanded his acting oeuvre, Childish Gambino returned in 2016 with *Awaken, My Love*, an album unmistakably and unapologetically black in sound, aesthetic, and content. Read as a response to accusation of self-dilution in appeasement of whiteness, the album makes a strong statement about Glover’s present creative direction. The release of *Awaken, My Love* coincided with the debut of *Atlanta*, Glover’s television show which he created, writes for, and stars in.

*Atlanta*, the first and currently only season of which ran on FX from 2016 – 2017, represents blackness in ways informed by Glover’s experiences living in Stone Mountain, Georgia. When the audience is first introduced to Earn, Glover’s character, he is a struggling young father living beneath his potential as a dropout of Princeton University and has run out of career and life options until an underground single by his cousin Alfred (Brian Tyree Henry), who goes by Paper Boi, offers him new hope as a manager of the latter’s burgeoning career as a rapper.

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<sup>347</sup> Fleischer, Adam. “Childish Gambino Writes Poem About Being Black In America, And Refuses To Apologize For It.” *MTV News*, 14 Aug. 2014, [www.mtv.com/news/1899822/childish-gambino-poem-black-america/](http://www.mtv.com/news/1899822/childish-gambino-poem-black-america/).

*Atlanta* has been most frequently compared to *Master of None*, discussed in depth in the previous chapter, simply because both are shows by men of colour that have been granted the mantle of 'authenticity' by white audiences. Beyond each show's initial adherence to a template followed by highly personal, semi-autobiographical auteur sitcoms, Ansari's and Glover's creative intents diverge significantly.

*Atlanta's* pilot puts most of its energy towards introducing the characters and establishing the premise, beginning in media res, as the episode, titled 'The Big Bang', opens with a confrontation in a convenience-store parking lot where Earn tries to calm down Paper Boi as he confronts a man who tore off his rearview mirror.<sup>348</sup> The sound of a gunshot is heard, and the show quickly cuts back to the previous morning, when Earn wakes up next to Vanessa (Zazie Beetz), the mother of his daughter, Lottie. The second episode, 'Streets On Lock' picks up in the aftermath of the gunshot and sees Glover diving into experimenting with voice, tone, and structure to pinpoint exactly what the show's goals are.<sup>349</sup> 'Streets' follows a fairly typical structure, but its voice is anything but typical and the episode shades in the world Glover has created. Earn and Alfred are locked up following the shooting incident, the outcome of which remains unclear. Glover uses this incident as an opportunity to tell a story about the hip-hop fantasy of criminality and its alluring depiction of blackness and how it differs from the reality.

Released from jail, Paper Boi and his friend Darius go to get food, where he is approached by an enthusiastic waiter tells him that he is "the nigga." Curious, Paper Boi asks for an explanation. "I heard about that shoot-out you had on Twitter. You're one of the last real rappers, man." The waiter brags about being an old-school hip-hop fan who listens to Mobb Deep and 'real' rappers like the Notorious B.I.G. and 2Pac, and dismissing "singing-ass rappers" like Fetty Wap, noting it's "good to see a rapper blow a nigga."

Before leaving, the waiter pleads with Paper Boi, "Don't let me down. If you let me down, I don't know what I'd do." The scene is not subtle commentary; *Atlanta* wants the audience to know that violence and a specific strain of masculinity can benefit rappers like Paper Boi when trying to break onto the scene. Alfred physically roams free, but mentally he might as well still be in timeout with Earn. On one level, he is happy about his

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<sup>348</sup> Glover, Donald, prod. "The Big Bang." *Atlanta*. FX: 6 September 2016. DVD.

<sup>349</sup> Glover, Donald, prod. "Streets On Lock." *Atlanta*. FX: 13 September 2016. DVD.



newfound infamy inasmuch as it raises his profile musically, but he is also concerned about how his actions reverberate in his community. Not only that, he is also dealing with the weight of the fact that as a black man in America, he essentially has zero margin for error. And he just made a huge mistake, one for which Earn continues to suffer, and has spread quickly enough that kids with toy guns are imitating him.

In America, black men's lives are delineated by fraught paths of resistance and revival typically uncharted and often ending in strife or loss. *Atlanta* works to tell stories within the margins of an existence determined by others' perceptions of one's body's potential for violation/violence, arguing for a person's right to carve out their own understanding of blackness and maleness against a reductive background of flattened racial and gender experience. The projection of black masculinity as an inherently weaponizable, as an unqualified threat to white hegemonic norms acts as point of departure for the show.

*Atlanta's* existence at this juncture in American history is one of implicit but undeniable protest. To depict realistic black lives on television without turning to 'suffering porn' is particularly tricky when it comes to sitcoms as the most popular black television shows at the moment are dramas (e.g. *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* on NBC; *Empire* on FOX; *Queen Sugar* on the Oprah Winfrey Network; *Luke Cage* on Netflix). When it comes to comedy, given the history of black stereotypes within the genre, how does one make a show that both appeals to the public and is true to blackness as something multifaceted and not simply a reworked vision of minstrelsy? And when there is already a popular 'black show' like *Black-ish* on the air, how does one convince audiences that black and minority lives are not a monolith and that there can be thousands of television shows depicting their experiences without plumbing the full depths that their history has to offer?

These are the questions that precede both the creation and any readings of *Atlanta*. Set in a city whose population is roughly 54 percent black, the show locates the prime setting to represent the multitudes of blackness, giving audiences a sense of the city's cultural and historical makeup through establishing overhead pans that range from the cul-de-sacs to the debris-covered buildings, scenes of children imitating gunplay near low-income housing, and wide shots of the surrounding metropolis. Capturing the city's

aesthetic is an intentional part of the show's approach: "There were some things so subtle and black that people had no idea what we were talking about." Speaking to *Vulture* and referencing a scene in which an actor purposefully delivered his line in a drawl that was nearly indecipherable to non-natives of Atlanta, Glover recalls,

After three takes, Hiro took me aside and was like, 'I don't know what he's saying.' To Hiro, this nigga is speaking patois. That character is an artifact. Culturally, we're becoming very homogenised. That dude isn't going to be around in seven years. You aren't going to be able to find him. White people are moving into Bankhead [one of the historically blackest neighbourhoods in *Atlanta*]. It's important that dude gets represented in this show.<sup>350</sup>

The desire to accurately convey this sense of place has driven Glover for a while. In the same interview, he says, "I needed people to understand I see Atlanta as a beautiful metaphor for black people." For him, *Atlanta* is an ideal laboratory – rather than a mere stage – to explore the true variety of the black experience. The elegance of the show's cinematography does not translate to a pure romanticization of the city. What these shots do instead is create a sense of normalcy, saying that blackness is not an other — a curiosity for the white eye — but a way of life. Atlanta itself is both backdrop for and character in their story, and the way Murai and Glover envision it, the everyday is married to the surreal, creating a world that magnifies beauty, peril, and the bizarre all at once.

The hypnotic quality of the show's cinematography accentuates the commonplace and all too expected terror that can come with living there. After getting arrested for a non-fatal shooting, Earn is left in holding without ever being told why he is being kept there. Greeted again with exhaustion without much hope of relief, he is soon forced to watch as a mentally disabled prisoner is brutally beaten by guards. The lights flicker, turning the whole scene into something not unlike a horror movie, briefly turning *Atlanta's* dream world into something closer to a nightmare as viewers are reminded that as much as everything else the show has depicted thus far, police violence is part and parcel of the black experience too.

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<sup>350</sup> Browne, Rembert. "Donald Glover Turns His Eye to His Hometown – and Black America – in Atlanta." *Vulture*, 23 Aug. 2016, [www.vulture.com/2016/08/donald-glover-atlanta.html](http://www.vulture.com/2016/08/donald-glover-atlanta.html).

Is the show's chief concern then showing white people what black culture is? Despite the surface of Glover's messaging, to argue such would be reductive. Instead, what the show does is reimagine the moment of confrontation along the lines of Glissant's conception of meeting, as a point of acknowledgement of the unfillable gaps in knowledge that necessarily frame interactions with the other. If *Atlanta* is a metaphor for black people, then black people can never truly be known – cities are in constant flux, and a street that might lead one person home could be a dead-end that traps another.

The focus on Atlanta as an organic construct, as itself a character distinctively black and Southern, slows the plot's movement; the early episodes play out like half-hour vignettes instead of a continuing serial. Glover is less concerned with joke density, emphasizing instead character and mood. The series' different type of originality, shrewd and precise in the crafting of its realization, is in large part due to his assembling of a team of black men and one black woman, the majority of whom have never worked in a network writers' room.

While it has earned comparisons to *Master of None* and *Louie*, the show bears little resemblance to either of those projects that focus on the lives of successful comedians and the worlds that they inhabit. Instead, it is the rich history of the working-class family that *Atlanta* draws from. Glover's depiction of black lives in *Atlanta* is thoughtful and nuanced: The characters feel familiar and recognizable as they embody the reality that black history begins near the poverty line and is often manoeuvred and considered in relation to it. Black families in America have not historically been born into wealth, instead earning their positions through decades of hard work in myriad forms – sometimes a person breaks through with a degree, with a rap career, with a stroke of luck in a system is not designed for black success.

When Earn is arrested, despite not being directly involved, viewers see how he has to sit in a police station for an entire day waiting to be processed. Throughout his ordeal, he encounters other men and women who are repeatedly circled through the prison system. While they are sitting in holding, Earn turns to Paper Boi and says, "I've never been arrested before." Paper Boi is released faster than his kinfolk because someone handled his paperwork for him. When Alfred tries to see about bailing Earn out and inquires about why exactly he's been arrested, the government employee quips, "What's

the charge? Nigga, this ain't a movie. You better wait until he's in the system." And when Vanessa bails out Earn, he is not humiliated or berated for his arrest. When she reminds him that it is not the first time she has had to bail someone out of jail, it is *Atlanta's* way of illuminating a real part of many black lives without being condescending.

Earn's experience with the justice system illustrates Glover's primary preoccupation in the show's first season: the conundrum of a society that fetishises ghetto cool but marginalises the men who embody it. As cultural critic Emily Nussbaum notes, "Black masculinity is a set of poses that everyone imitates, including black men."<sup>351</sup> In a sequence in the pilot, a white DJ tells Earn a story that ends with the n-word. It is a pure expression of privilege: Earn needs the DJ as a contact and is thus forced to allow him to assume an unearned kinship. Later, however, when Earn goads the DJ to tell the same story with the same ending to the tougher and scarier Paper Boi, along with their friend Darius – to tell it to three black men instead of just one, the DJ leaves out the crucial word in panic.

In examining the idea of 'real' blackness, author and poet Kevin Young poses the questions: How do you become American? Is this the same as becoming black? The idea of Americanness being tied to cultural blackness because of the 'authenticity' that it confers is not new but the constructions of blackness in the media have been limited because of the pains they take to accommodate white worldviews of what blackness is. *Atlanta* purposefully bucks that trend by venturing into black-specific spaces (what whiteness might view as self-exclusionary enclaves, ignoring the necessity of creating those spaces for one's self in a world that rejects black bodies in all others), and does not shy away from the black gaze.

What sets *Atlanta* apart is how it treats blackness not as cultural commodity but as private, shifting, personal; an individualised, focused blackness that embraces historicity but also the present; unsanitised from the pressures of white supremacy; non-confrontational but also non-conciliatory. Young writes,

Finally the chief problem with racial impostors or blackface: it can be only, as James Weldon Johnson said of stereotypical black dialect, comic or tragic.

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<sup>351</sup> Nussbaum, Emily. "The Slo-Mo Specificity of." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 18 June 2017, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/19/the-slo-mo-specificity-of-atlanta](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/19/the-slo-mo-specificity-of-atlanta).

Ultimately, it conforms to white views of “the blacks” themselves, offstage: as either a joke or a set of jailed youths and stooped old people.<sup>352</sup>

In the white imagination, thinking about or acting out blackness is polarised: it is either comic or tragic. This binarism does not only apply to the overt minstrelsy of blackface, but also to black stories written by white people. Systemic racism and racial injustices, as well cultural content that reifies homogeneity and denies the potential for multiplicity leads to a societal inability to conceive of a blackness, or rather multiple blacknesses, that function independently of those affective modes. It is outside of this limited liminal space that Glover’s work operates.

Glover’s writings acts to contextualize and draw attention to those differences without explicitly defining or translating them: “I wanted to show White people, you don’t know everything about Black culture,” he said. His goals with “*Atlanta*” also reflect the criticism Glover has received for years over his popularity in white cultural spaces.

I know when I go to Baltimore, when I go to D.C., it’s like 50-50—half of them are like, ‘I love this dude, this dude’s cool.’ And the other half are like, ‘This coon-ass dude,’” he said. “But I have no hate in my heart for no Black person ever. Because we’re in a position where the system has fucked us up so bad we can’t always trust each other.”<sup>353</sup>

Neoliberalism requires that, where possible, black and other non-white people bear the brunt of the economic crisis, after which they should be retrained, managed and disciplined anew so they may be more thoroughly enrolled, materially and imaginatively, into its marketised view of the world. These groups, coded as disposable and redundant, are left to fend for themselves. *Atlanta* revisits this notion throughout its run. In episode three, “Go For Broke,” Earn, living on the precipice of poverty, takes Vanessa out for a nice dinner, clearly agonizingly calculating every item both of them order to the point at which him ending the meal by running out on the check seems inevitable.<sup>354</sup> In episode six, “Value,” Vanessa’s rewards herself for surviving the daily grind of economic strife by sharing a joint with an old friend but is then punished by a surprise drug test at work (she

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<sup>352</sup> Young, Kevin in Ward, Jesmyn. *The Fire this Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*. Simon and Schuster, 2017: p. 36.

<sup>353</sup> Browne, 2016

<sup>354</sup> Glover, Donald, prod. “Go For Broke.” *Atlanta*. FX: 13 September 2016. DVD.

fails not by testing positive but by admitting to her boss that she smoked the night before).<sup>355</sup> In episode eight, "The Club," Paper Boi's VIP appearance at a club is greeted by lukewarm applause and a conspicuous absence of fans, leading the club to withhold more than four-thousand dollars from the previously agreed-upon five thousand dollar payment from Earn.<sup>356</sup>

The post-racial paradigm edges out the promise of broad class-based solidarities against increasing normalizations of deprivation, exclusion and impoverishment. These epistemologies of post-race articulate an official antiracism that is tailored evermore precisely to the interests and operations of neoliberal capital as primary, natural and just. This post-election period is the right time to, as *Atlanta* does, visually show what is at stake in a tumultuous capitalist system. Paper Boi's career might not take off, or he could decide that his cousin who cannot handle doing shots at clubs and is uncomfortable talking to businesspeople might not be the best manager for him. Vanessa might not be able to find work, and even if she does, her on-again, off-again relationship with Earn means she might not let him stay at her place. These issues are cultural as well as economic, and watching them play out onscreen reflects a reality in which minorities are harder hit by financial and social precarity in a climate where white supremacy is being openly embraced by the President and his government.

The show ends on a quietly poignant note. Until the last few minutes of the finale, Glover grants the audience only this — a lost jacket with an unexpected and increasingly alarming significance.<sup>357</sup> As Earn moves through the episode, none of the season's traditional comic commentary is lost. In a skit-like structure previously used on a different episode, Earn sifts through the Snapchat photos to retrace his previous night out with his cousin. The lost jacket hunt ultimately leads Earn and Alfred to become witnesses of police violence when the pair get caught up in a drug sting, and their matter-of-fact reactions quietly emphasise how routine struggle and violence has become to the black narrative. Only minutes after witnessing the shooting of a man who stole his jacket, Earn asks officers on the scene to check the dead man's pockets, more desperate for the pocket's contents than for assurance that justice will be served.

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<sup>355</sup> Glover, Donald, prod. "Value." *Atlanta*. FX: 4 October 2016. DVD.

<sup>356</sup> Glover, Donald, prod. "The Club." *Atlanta*. FX: 18 October 2016. DVD.

<sup>357</sup> Glover, Donald, prod. "The Jacket." *Atlanta*. FX: 1 November 2016. DVD.

If *Atlanta* opened with a bang, it ended with a sigh – whether it was one of content and discontent is dependent on the viewer. The audience sees Earn find the contents of his jacket — one small key he accidentally left with a friend before going out with Paper Boi. Paper Boi drives Earn and pays him for his work as his manager. Earn gives most of the money over to Vanessa for her and their daughter. The show’s final scene is that of Earn using the key to open a storage closet. Some minutes pass and it is revealed that Earn sleeps there. If there is turmoil in the moment, it is from the audience’s projection; Earn seems, for the first time in the series, relieved, perhaps at finally having a space that is his own, despite how incomprehensible living that way might be to others. No insight is given into what will happen next. Yet, Glover cements what is important — blackness, in the world of *Atlanta*, exists unbothered both because it can, and because it must. For hardship to meaningfully exist with joy, the narrative of blackness must remain free of judgment.

### ***Insecure and Atlanta in conversation***

In his essay *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin argued that however famous black performers become, he explained, they are constrained by the limited choices afforded to them by a racist industry.<sup>358</sup> Extrapolated to the rest of the film and television industry, the same can be said of black producers, writers, directors, and those on every strata of the studio system. Black creatives must also navigate a minefield of expectations, having to represent both themselves as artists and their entire community. The explosion of black creatives over the past several years seems to have rendered Baldwin’s observation inaccurate. The growth has not come out of nowhere but instead has been built on the success of showrunners like Shonda Rhimes and Mara Brock Akil who have opened doors for shows like *Atlanta* and *Insecure* to join a parade of others making their mark on television like *Queen Sugar*, *Chewing Gum*, *Luke Cage*, *Being Mary Jane*, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and *Empire*.

In describing 2016 on television, Dee Lockett wrote for *Vulture*, “It’s no coincidence that one of television’s best years was also the year it got noticeably blacker.”<sup>359</sup> The uptick in diversity in front of and behind the camera has gotten attention

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<sup>358</sup> Baldwin, James. *The devil finds work*. Vintage, 2011.

<sup>359</sup> Lockett, Dee. “29 Very Black Things That Happened on TV in 2016.” *Vulture*, [www.vulture.com/2016/12/29-very-black-things-that-happened-on-tv-in-2016.html](http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/29-very-black-things-that-happened-on-tv-in-2016.html).

across media outlets like CNN and MTV News, yet as tempting as it is to herald a new golden age for black television, it is crucial to keep in mind that the conversation moving forward will be about whether this is the start of ‘normalizing’ black narratives on television, or whether it is simply another trend on the wane.

Steps forward in representation for minority audiences are often followed by a disappointing backpedalling. The current waxing of representative control by people of colour coincides with the critical shift to an interest in “auteur” series. In the years following HBO’s *The Sopranos* auteur series with mostly white and male creators like *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* rarely hired black writers or told the stories of black characters. Even the two that did, *The Wire* and *Treme*, also HBO products, were helmed by white creator David Simon. When it is mostly white men who are treated as artistic visionaries, it limits what kind of television is seen as both prestigious viable and defines who is given the access and funding to make such shows. Creatives of colour rarely have the opportunity to create a body of work that can vault them into the realm of indispensable. The reverence that authors receive often translates into financial backing. Thus, when black creatives are entrusted with big projects, it can be the first step to involving others like them in the future process.

The degree of behind-the-scenes diversity on television shows in practice in the production of *Insecure* and *Atlanta* simply did not exist in the previous cycle of black sitcoms. This is a result of these show’s creators intentionally seeking talent from outside the traditional network system, for example through independent film or music videos. The work of Glover and Rae, both of whom got their starts on YouTube and built notable followings through social media, is evidence that marginalized artists are able to tap directly into an audience that networks might not know exists or how to engage with to tell stories are both niche and universal.

While the creatives of colour discussed in previous chapters have responded to the hypervisibility offered by their unique positions of power by either leaning in to or bristling at the idea of tokenization and unwarranted scrutiny, Glover and Rae deftly manoeuvre the question of their hypervisibility in two ways: first, by using their power as a way to boost the visibility of other black people and minorities; second, by creating narrative environments that turn that visibility on its head through the subversion of



presumed knowledge – about masculinity/femininity, about social class and sexuality, and above all, about blackness. Glover and Rae speak to the need for more black stories in a wider variety of genres by playing with the audience’s understanding of how sitcoms and dramas should function especially in dialogues about race. *Insecure* and *Atlanta* are each in conversation with a television history that has too often defined in relation to whiteness and obscured the need for nuance.

Following Glover’s and Rae’s critical and commercial successes, perhaps the novelty of seeing black people both in front of and behind the camera on television is on its way to becoming a thing of the past. Black creators are familiar with how this cycle usually plays out: reaching a point of saturation of non-whiteness on television and having their creative spaces revoked by those in charge of a given platform. That is why Glover’s and Rae’s ground-up building of their creative projects matters – they parlay their understanding of the specificity of their experiences into a commercially appealing product that does not require pandering to whiteness through the uncritical emulation of zero-sum game neoliberal ideals.

## Conclusion

On November 19, 2017, the documentary *The Problem with Apu* debuts on TruTV. Conceived by Indian American comedian Hari Kondabolu, the film focuses on the character of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from the FOX animated sitcom *The Simpsons* and his impact on South Asian Americans, particularly those currently working in Hollywood. Voiced by actor Hank Azaria since the character's first appearance in 1990, Apu has been a sharply divisive figure amongst members of the South Asian community who must contend with the character's popularity hinging on the running joke is that he is Indian. Kondabolu's frustration with Apu led to a five minute-long bit in a stand-up set the comedian performed on W. Kamau Bell's show *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell* in 2012. The enthusiastic reception Kondabolu witnessed led him to consider expanding on the material, framing the documentary through attempts to trace the character's origin story and land an interview with Azaria, whose voice work Kondabolu describes as "a white guy doing an impression of a white guy making fun of my father."<sup>360</sup>

Kondabolu's efforts are admirable, and the documentary, in its inclusion of a multitude of South Asian American working actors, will certainly serve greater purpose than a deep dive into a single cartoon character. Although not yet available to the public in full, one quote that appears in a *New York Times* piece on the documentary speaks volumes as to how the distillation of the Indian American experience to a crudely rendered stock character came to be and what that reductiveness means.

When asked what it is that makes Apu funny, Dana Gould, a writer and executive producer on *The Simpsons* tries to explain by sketching out the appeal of other characters closely identified with the show: Barney Gumble is funny because he is the town alcoholic; Wayland Smithers, Mr. Burns's sycophantic assistant, is funny because he was a closeted gay man for most of the show's run (he recently came out in a 2016 episode); and Apu is funny because he sounds like an Indian – or rather, Azaria's version of one. According to Gould, "There are accents that by their nature, to white Americans, I can only speak from experience, sound funny."<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Ito, Robert. "You Love 'The Simpsons'? Then Let's Talk About Apu." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Nov. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/television/the-problem-with-apu-the-simpsons.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/television/the-problem-with-apu-the-simpsons.html).

<sup>361</sup> Ito, 2017

In the *Times* article, Kondabolu speaks about his concern while filming that he might not be able to convince Azaria to take part in the documentary, and wonders if that would render his work invalid. To this, fellow comedian Utkarsh Ambudkar points out,

You got all these brown people to come together and talk about something. We could have been talking about model trains! But some 15-year-old kid is going to be like, look at all these powerful, talented, visible brown people in one place. I can do this, too.<sup>362</sup>

This filtering of a uniquely minoritarian experience through the lens of whiteness, minimised to the point of outlandishness and grotesquery, and the subsequent minority response to this dismissal has been what I have sought to examine in this thesis.

In this thesis, I have looked at *The Mindy Project*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Black-ish*, *Master of None*, *Dr. Ken*, *Atlanta*, and *Insecure* as part of a wave of comedies that are taking on race in bracing and irreverent ways. To varying degrees of success – and perhaps even more clearly in their missteps – these shows have acknowledged how far Americans have to go when it comes to issues of institutional racism and interpersonal bias. Most of the shows in this current wave of racially aware comedies no longer designate single episodes for “solving” a difficult problem, and intentionally make space for nuanced portrayals of people of colour. Veteran showrunner Michael Schur whose projects include the diversely cast *Brooklyn 99* on Fox and *The Good Place* on NBC notes,

Now what you have are lead characters and whole families that are complex, flawed and kind of terrible sometimes and different from each other and funny and stupid, and all of the things that white people have been able to be on TV forever.<sup>363</sup>

The increase in showrunners of colour is has triggered a compelling shift in television offerings, changing the media landscape. However, as I have shown in this thesis, the idea that a behind-the-scenes redress of power automatically leads to a more complete depiction of the lived realities of minority folk is weakly evidenced. Instead, within the context of the post-racial, race is often wielded as a cloak of invisibility, rendering

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<sup>362</sup> Ito, 2017

<sup>363</sup> Ryan, Maureen. “Why TV Is Finally Embracing the Realities of Race.” *Variety*, 20 Jan. 2017, [variety.com/2016/tv/features/television-race-diversity-ratings-1201712266/](http://variety.com/2016/tv/features/television-race-diversity-ratings-1201712266/).

characters within the narrative world incapable of perceiving it. Such disingenuous discourse about race has led to the continued obfuscation of race-specific writing in favour of a perceived objective whiteness.

On June 11, 2013, Singaporean Chinese writer Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians*, about a Chinese-American woman who travels to Singapore with her boyfriend and experiences serious culture shock, was published to widespread popular acclaim. A little over one year later, a movie adaptation was announced, co-financed by production companies Colour Force and Ivanhoe Pictures. In May 2016, Chinese American director Jon M. Chu, was hired as the director, a decision partly credited to the presentation he had given based on his experiences as a first generation Asian American. Lead actors Henry Golding and Constance Wu were cast soon after and the movie is currently undergoing filming as of November 2017. In a recent interview with *Entertainment Weekly* discussing the movie, Kwan revealed that one of the first Hollywood producers who approached him about making a *Crazy Rich Asians* movie asked if the story could be reconceptualised with a white woman as the lead. "I was like, 'Well, you've missed the point completely. I said, 'No, thank you.'"<sup>364</sup>

In looking at the television shows that I have selected for the purposes of this thesis, I have engaged with that process of denying and rejecting another's perception of you and asserting your own self. Negotiating the post-racial on American television in the age of Trump is an ongoing exercise in tracing and constructing processes that work best when they are invisible, and confronting the various ways in which visibility is then approximated. My primary objective during this project has been to examine one feature of the complex and interwoven historical and social imperatives that shape televisual representation. In close reading the shows I have chosen, certain themes recur in in current and future representations of race on television. While much scholarship of the post-racial has sought to disprove the notion itself by demonstrating the varied ways in which race still functions to limit and categorize people, this thesis has held its purpose to be to tease out the voices that work within those limitations. Moving beyond a summary dismissal of the post-racial as a utopic and uncritical mode of thinking, I have argued that the post, having driven much of the creative practices of the past decade of

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<sup>364</sup> McHenry, Jackson. "A Producer Wanted to Cast *Crazy Rich Asians* With a White Lead." *Vulture*, 3 Nov. 2017, [www.vulture.com/2017/11/a-producer-wanted-crazy-rich-asians-with-white-lead.html](http://www.vulture.com/2017/11/a-producer-wanted-crazy-rich-asians-with-white-lead.html).

television, is more productively theorised as a working-through of the demands of simultaneously acknowledging and sidestepping race.

Without an interrogative eye towards the real-time responses to perceived post-racial demands, it would be easy to pretend that these shows and their individual and cumulative outputs exist in a vacuum and to ignore how they might gatekeep and reproduce damaging hegemonic ideologies. A recent study revealed that only 4.8% of television writers are black. How do we hold this fact alongside the idea that nobody “really believes” in the post-racial? If the post-racial had truly been dismantled, there would be greater parity in hiring practices as people consider the weight of each creative and financial decision in terms of rectifying past injustices.

With this in mind, I want to summarize what Asian American creative output working within the post-racial can teach us about television and society-at-large. The first is that the post-racial obliterates cultural specificity because when race is not written into the script, the script will inevitably result in a normalization vis-à-vis whiteness of characters. The false dichotomy that has been propagated is that recognition of race must necessarily entail stereotypes, whether harmful or ‘benign’. The idea that representation is a zero-sum game that requires either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ figures or narratives is both shaped by and bolsters the idea that only whiteness holds the privilege of neutrality. The response to the post-racial backlash has been to mock the notion of ‘very special’ episodes or series that overtly focus on race. The ‘muchness’ of the discourse on race is framed by what is acceptable to whiteness – white audiences and white creators, for whom consideration of lives outside of the bubble is rarely explored. Race is not something that is merely ‘made visible’ through acknowledgement – it is something that is enacted, invisibilised, lived. When it is treated as an intrusion, the effect is strained, as I explored with *The Mindy Project*, for example, Mindy being the only doctor of colour (and woman) in her practice but that never causing any issue in the workplace.

Post-racial politics assume a shared definition of ‘racial’ that is immutable and objective across histories, cultures, and borders. A strict adherence to the concept of ‘moving past’ disallows differences in how and to what extent people choose to engage with race, as well as presents a skewed and covertly aspirational view of reality. Whiteness is allowed a full breadth of diversity, but non-whiteness is implicitly expected

to embody a monolithic 'minority' experience. What I have been concerned with in this thesis is looking at the spaces in which non-whites have railed against the impossibility of authenticity by carving out a type of cultural specificity that allows minority audience members to see and hear stories that resonate with them.

The post-racial and its attendant shortcomings are painfully apparent, yet it thrives because it feeds on the inherent narcissism and solipsism of whiteness ruminating on itself. It persists despite a shocking lack of intellectual or academic vitality to support it because networks and the executives who run them continue to parrot a belief in 'unforced' diversity, a practice that assumes that the best person for a role (whether on or off the screen) is likely to present themselves regardless of the systemic hurdles placed in their way if they are not straight, white, or male. To compensate for the 'incidental' whiteness of these major players, diversity then becomes reduced to the quantity of racial difference and not the quality.

This leads to the second notion that emerges which is that, like in other industries, the idea of the person for the job contingent on race and the preconceived notions of race. Everyone involved in the creation of a television show, be they producers, casting directors, actors, publicists, etc. – are all people who live in our world and who are affected by the hegemonic beliefs that society at large upholds and maintains. If society believes that two lead actors of colour automatically translate to a black show or a Latino show or an Asian show, what does that mean for creators? A visibly black/Latino/Asian show presumes an identifiably black/Latino/Asian narrative – but what does that even mean? Creators, even as people of colour themselves, subconsciously absorb and subsequently encourage that writing to minorities is pandering and will automatically deduct a great number of white viewers. This translates to an almost pathological – if not always intentional – aversion to racial nuance in hiring and storytelling practices. The avoidance of a 'non-white' or deviant label becomes the goal so as to not adversely affect the reception of a series. While networks continue to spout platitudes of diversity, the meaning of this word has insidiously shifted from a meaning that welcomes broad swathes of peoples and experiences, to one that fixates on numerical and statistical appeal and viability.

The third issue that delving into the post-racial addresses is the need to reconsider the agency of the showrunner and how it interacts with the nexus of power that

determines representation on television. That race is akin to a yoke or a burden illustrates a narrow but widespread perception of what race means contemporarily. The 'raced' nature of whiteness is skimmed over and that whiteness instead becomes a permissibly unweighted framework around which to craft televisual narratives. Work on the production of culture has value not only for exploring racial representations in film and television but also in understanding the social and historical practices that give rise to those representations and the cultural power strengthen these processes. The lack of cultural specificity in any given television program stems from a system of top-down decisions from both the television producer/creator and network executives. When casting specifications are not firmly written into the story and skew towards a vague and undefined 'multicultural' look, casting options theoretically become more diverse, but often what happens instead is visual diversity becomes an unsatisfying stand-in for complex and culturally sensitive characters.

The invisibility of these stories is a natural outcome of the systemic exclusion of viable minority writers in Hollywood. Diversity initiatives have had mixed results. For example, to counter this barrier (mostly after being heavily pressured by diversity groups), some television networks created departments of diversity in charge of overseeing the multicultural development of certain types of programming and instituted apprenticeship programs for aspiring writers who are then placed on a writing staff, with their salary being paid by the network as opposed to coming out of the television program's budget. This functions as a type of incentive for the television producer to be diverse. After serving on staff for one or two years, the writer-apprentice's contract is reviewed and the show's producer decides whether or not the writer will be kept onboard. Having fulfilled this perfunctory nod to subsidised diversity, shows can claim to have done their duty in fair hiring practices and to refute tokenism in favour of merit-based rewards. What little space minority writers are able to carve out for themselves is swiftly paved over when incentives to challenge the status quo run out.

In engaging with the politics of representation and the limits of that discourse, this thesis has explored four concepts tied to post-racial theory in order to interrogate their usefulness in 21st Century readings of cultural texts. Chapter two on the *The Mindy Project* questioned the dangers of unquestioning assimilation; chapter three used *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* as a point of departure to explore how people of colour respond

to, rewrite and/or reinscribe racialization; through readings of *Master of None* and *Dr. Ken*, chapter four looked at constructions of authenticity; and chapter five studied the tactical appeal of opacity as a representational approach via *Insecure* and *Atlanta*. As America attempts to reckon with its identity under President Trump, there is a steady and perceptible shift in how media representations are received and critiqued in a post-truth age. Large swathes of representational tactics are ignored because they do not come from historically valued sources, i.e. white minds and bodies. The post-racial as a concept might have seemed to have run its course of usefulness in contemporary analyses of media, but this thesis has drawn attention to the nuances missing in those analyses sought to highlight the problems of what it leaves out.

In October 2016, mere weeks before he was elected 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Donald Trump declared himself “the least racist person you have ever met,” indirectly responding and further contributing to the back-and-forth discourse over the nature of his appeal. Over a year after his election, conservative and liberal media alike continue to mount expeditions to Trump country – imagined here exclusively as working class and white – to lay claim on a definitive answer to this debate. Such attempts to rationalize and explain away a mistake of national and epic proportions are a direct outgrowth of the post-racial devaluation of minority voices. The same basic thesis that Trump’s appeal is based purely on economic hardship is offered again and again despite growing clamour from non-white people that race, with all the attendant oppressions and aggressions it implies, is the beating heart of American identity.

Understanding the relationship between race and television has been the crux of this thesis. My primary objective was to use the post-racial as a lens to explore how ideas of racialization and visibility continue to shape social attitudes that reinforce whiteness at the expense of racial and cultural difference. The post-racial and its positioning of race neutrality as not only possible but preferable is a failed project because race has never been, is not, and can never be neutral. The assumption of race neutrality as means and proof of progress is also incorrect because displacing difference and assuming a position of normative whiteness is far from progressive. What it actually does is render people of colour invisible and, as microaggressions commonly do, slowly erode the spirit of difference. The shared similarities of the human experience cannot be grasped without fully acknowledging and including difference. The discomfort this entails is good and



necessary as it forces people to confront, reckon with, and try to atone for savage histories, a necessary prerequisite for progress. Unpacking the small and subtle ways that race is reinforced through uncritical dissemination of post-racial rhetoric can ultimately assist members of the media and audiences in respecting difference in background and approaching an intricate and genuine multicultural society.

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